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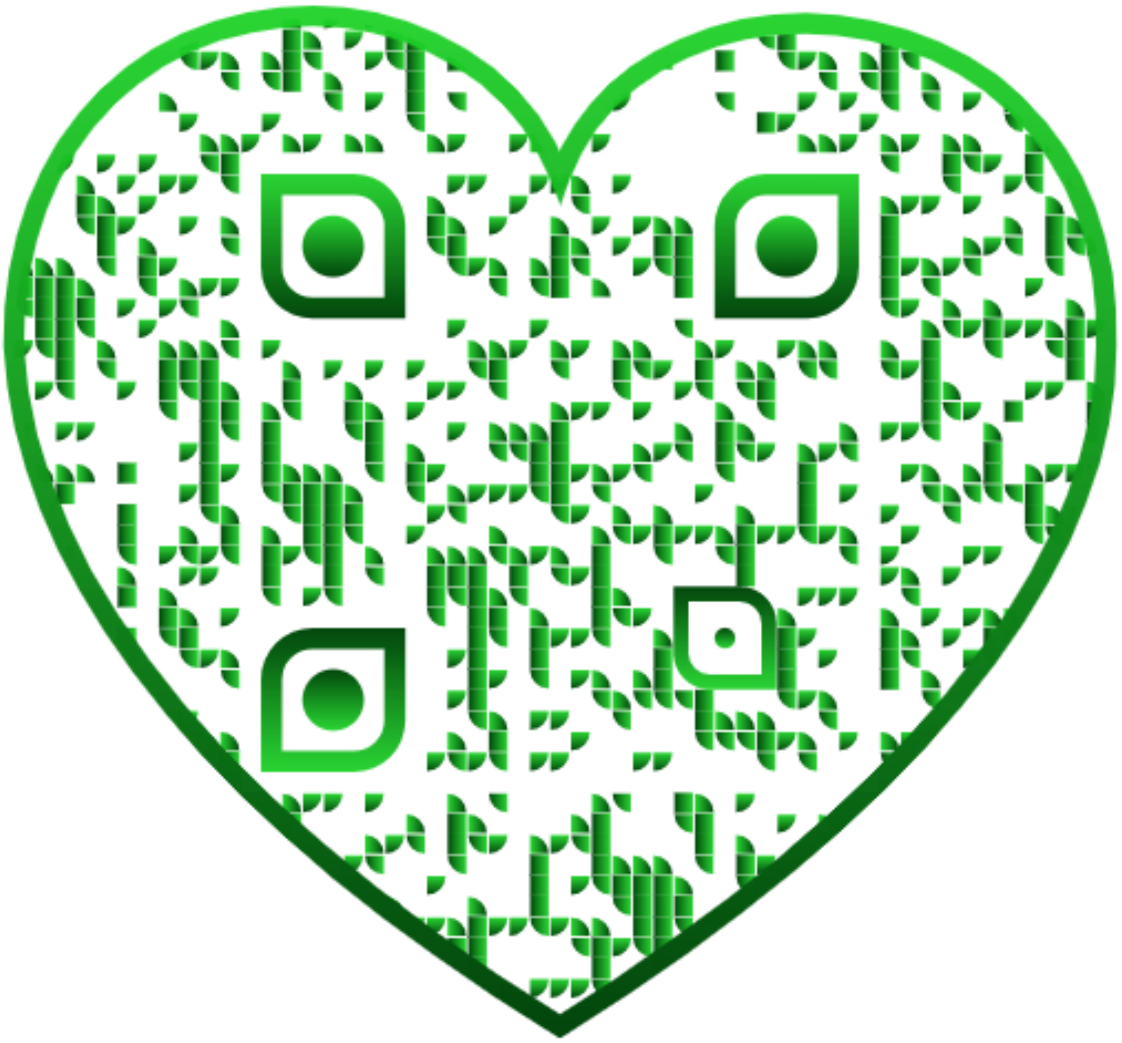
JUNE – AUGUST 2024
ISSUE 017

# Rolling Stone

AU/NZ

# Crowded House



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Tash Sultana is embarking on a transformative journey that extends beyond the realm of music. Renowned as a global multi-platinum multi-instrumentalist, engineer, producer, singer-songwriter, entrepreneur, and business owner, Tash, along with their spouse Jimi Sultana and close friend Mark Rice, has established the I AM ME FOUNDATION. Born out of my own personal struggles with gender identity, the Foundation has been carefully curated over the course of the past 7 years. I recognised the power of my platform and I believe in transcending the boundaries of music to make a meaningful impact. This endeavour represents a personal odyssey to foster unity and extend assistance and support to areas that have remained inaccessible.

The I am Me Foundation strives to create a safe community for LGBTQIA+ people by offering support and financial assistance to individuals who lack the means to undergo the transformative processes that help them align their physical bodies with their true gender identity. By offering two grants per year, the Foundation helps reduce the economic obstacles that many gender non-conforming individuals face when seeking surgical procedures that affirm their gender identity.

On top of that, Tash and Jimi Sultana have launched their seltzer company - Lonely Lands Liquids - a range of exceptional bevs that also support The I am Me Foundation.  As a company committed to innovation, inclusivity, and giving back, we proudly present a diverse range of premium seltzers and non-alcoholic options that redefine your hydration journey. But you aren't just drinking them for the sake of it, you're giving back with each can you crack.

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RS

ISSUE 17


**ARTIST** 3%
**PHOTOGRAPH BY**
SAVITRI WENDT

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Crowded House, photographed on 9 March 2024 at G.G.McG Studios, Melbourne

| | |
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# Editor's Letter

# Where Legacies Are Built

TELL ME WHERE YOU WERE when you *first* heard Crowded House's seminal song "Fall At Your Feet" and the memory may escape you. Tell me where you were when you *last* heard it, and it's likely to conjure a happy memory soundtracked by its hauntingly intimate lyrics. If you'll be so kind as to let me assume, I think that's because, for most of us, Crowded House has existed in the patchwork of our love for music since the very beginning. For some, it was the very first stitch.

Awarding the beloved band the Icon Award at this year's Rolling Stone Australia Awards was a unanimous editorial decision. This is a band who are still making their indelible mark on music globally, who achieve consistent chart success, and who continue to soundtrack our lives with the kind of songwriting prowess only earned after almost four decades of craftwork.

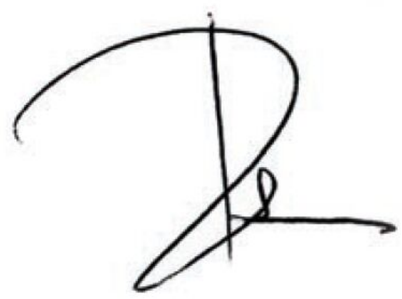
When Neil Finn performed at our Awards he joked onstage that he had to pencil in his eyebrows for the Icon Award honour, "I think it means you need to go to Mecca and buy some makeup, so I've done that".

> "For most of us, Crowded House has existed in the patchwork of our love for music since the very beginning."

Finn gave our Print Editor James Jennings unfiltered access to the proverbial kitchen in Crowded House. Sharing recipe secrets and even switching out ingredients at the last minute (I promise this will make more sense when you read the cover feature), Finn and his bandmates, including his two sons Liam and Elroy, have helped us answer the question: what does it take to continue an iconic legacy?

Elsewhere in the magazine you'll see our commitment to Australasia's climate crisis has not waned, neither has our dedication to spotlighting local music. This issue features exploratory pieces on Allday, Pond, Nooky, Dallas Woods, Angus Field and Tori Forsyth. Plus our Future 25 list of the most exciting and innovative artists from Australia and Aotearoa. We've also delved into Australia and New Zealand's reissue record label scene with a piece on the curators on an obsessive quest to unearth forgotten gems of the past.

In a year that has further placed our cultural zeitgeist under the microscope – thanks to festival cancellations, recorded industry growth yet a flatlining consumption of local music from local fans, and a government determined to reshape our arts industries – the first half of 2024 brings with it many questions. And while *Rolling Stone* always does its best to answer those questions through thoughtful and diverse reporting, the road ahead is one that will require us to keep offering the nuanced context that only longform reporting can. Thank you, dear reader, for giving us that honour.



**POPPY REID**
**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

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- Sydney based indie-pop duo, **Alibii**, on connecting with **Adrian Breakspear** (ARIA-winning producer for Gang Of Youths, Amy Shark & more)

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# TORI FORSYTH
## *Is In Her Healing Era*

**TORI FORSYTH IS ONE OF MUSIC'S MOST VERSATILE STARS,** and we almost lost her.

Third album *All We Have Is Who We Are* is a siren call of lovingly crafted reminders of Forsyth's value — both as an artist and as a woman who has been through the eye of the needle and lived to pass on her talismans.

With its sparse traditionalism and gut-wrenching self-awareness, it's devastating to think the record may have never been created. The Queensland Music Award winner considered quitting music altogether in 2022 after the global pandemic left her disoriented. She was unclear on her place in a local industry where her stripes were hard-earned from clocking close to 150 shows a year touring with an output as prolific as it was varied. Meanwhile, the forced introspection of quarantine had her body talking to her in ways she had been distracting herself from: the pain and chronic fatigue syndrome from endometriosis were unbearable.

"It was the first time that I had stopped in my career and stayed in the same place," she says. "I think that's where a lot of it kind of came up. [...] It was just feeling like my body was against me. And that, you know, takes you down another route within your mind of 'My body is literally fighting against me'. I had to really shift that perspective to be able to heal it."

Moving her focus to her health with the same tenacious zeal that has seen her music take daring swings of the bat since 2018, Forsyth threw herself into studying fitness and nutrition. Incredibly, deprioritising her music gave her the exact guileless nonchalance needed to feel creative again.

"I just felt a pull to sit down every single day for fun and for no reason, just because I wanted to do it. [...] If it didn't happen within 30 to 45 minutes — an hour tops — I was like, 'Well, it's not happening today' and I'd just stop and move on and get on with my day.

"The way I kind of relate to it is we get to be that childlike self that got us here in the first place; and I think that there's a lot of freedom in just going, 'What does it look like to actually enjoy this and have fun again?'"

The result is arguably Tori Forsyth's most considered, progressive, and alchemic collection yet. Featuring longtime collaborator Shane Nicholson and ARIA Hall of Famer Kasey Chambers, and produced by Scott Horscroft, *All We Have Is Who We Are* leans into country music in a way Forsyth hadn't yet explored. It's more country torch-bearing than first record *Dawn Of The Dark*, and a far cry from the gritty guitars and alt-rock pleasure of *Provlépseis*.

Unwittingly, Forsyth's new fervour for music — and the way in which she is doing it — has placed her on the shoulders of music giants like Zach Bryan and Kasey Musgraves, who are bringing daring, lyric-driven authenticity back to the forefront. When I point this out to Forsyth directly, she sees the big picture.

"We hit a very pop-centred version of country a couple of years ago and it was all about the hook. Now we've got Zach Bryan releasing music that's stripped back. He's releasing poetry and the lyrics are so much the song as is their stories — and it's a little bit rough around the edges — but that has a place again.

"[...] I'm definitely not putting myself on a level that these giants of the industry are on but I do think that there's something that you can tap into when you're fully, authentically creating." ®

WORDS BY **POPPY REID**
PHOTOGRAPH BY **MICHELLE PITIRIS**

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POPPY REID *is Editor-in-Chief of* ROLLING STONE AU/NZ *and was named The Champion of Change at the 2023 B&T Women In Media Awards.*

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# The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

## The Highs and Lows of Girl in Red

*The super-relatable pop singer from Norway is ready for her close-up after touring with Taylor*

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Thea Traff**

## GIRL IN RED

MARIE ULVEN IS not a chill person. Over the course of lunch at a slick New York spot packed with women in expensive-looking black athleisure, she swings between aping Taylor Swift's arm flex on "The Man" from the Eras Tour – a move that Ulven, who opened for a few of those dates last winter, knows all about – and clutching her chest, breathless. "I'm just trying to deal with my anxiety when it comes," she says. "Right now, my heart really hurts."

Ulven's not having a heart attack, thank God. Sometimes, the Norwegian artist known as Girl in Red can just get a little overwhelmed. And with good reason. Today, no one at this swish eatery recognises the young woman in the blue Ralph Lauren sweater and LA Dodgers cap, but with a Swift stadium tour under her belt and a new record, *I'm Doing It Again Baby!*, out in the world, that could very well be about to change. As her creative director and longtime friend Isak Jenssen tells me: "She switches between being the most confident person I know to being very insecure. At one point, she didn't think she had the biggest potential, like Taylor or Billie. But now, I think, she realises she does."

Ulven, 25, has pretty much always taken music seriously – she's a true workhorse, like those superstars. The Oslo resident started writing songs when she was eight, playing guitar at 14, and has been producing her own music for a decade. After uploading her first song, the sad-and-sweet "I Wanna Be Your Girlfriend", to YouTube in 2018, things started moving very fast for the then-teen. She dropped two EPs in 2018 and 2019, followed by her debut album, *If I Could Make It Go Quiet*, in 2021. A poppy therapy session of a record that dealt with everything from macabre intrusive thoughts to the indignity of being a fuck buddy, the LP cemented Ulven's place in a weird-girl pop canon that includes the likes of Olivia Rodrigo and Gayle. She's relatable, but not cliché.

If three years seems a bit of a long time between albums for a budding artist, Ulven not only agrees with you, she's already worried about everything else she hasn't done yet: headlining her own arena tours, buying a midcentury pied-à-terre in Los Angeles, and, oh God, turning 30. "I need to learn to smell the fucking roses," she says, debating whether to just eat her Caesar salad with her hands – the giant leaves are unwieldy – or use a fork. Opting for the former, she adds: "I saw this TikTok about how we're the only species on the planet, humans, that are never satisfied. We set a goal and we really chase that fucking goal. And then we achieve it, and then we're like, 'What's next? What's next?' There's something really depressing about it."

In the end, Ulven went back to the studio when she was ready – when she had her fill of experiences to translate into music. "I'm inspired by paper and folders and fonts and light," she says, crunching into a crouton. "I'm inspired by espressos and traveling and trains. I'm inspired by waiters having etiquette. How he pours wine very nicely and lets you smell it first. I'm inspired by absolutely everything."

One big inspiration these days is her girlfriend, whom Ulven met at an Oslo bar in 2021 after deciding to just say yes to life instead of hiding on her couch. The night they met went on and on, Ulven says, culminating at the beach where they hung out under the stars with her dog. "Prior to meeting my girlfriend, I was very much convinced that I was unlovable, and I really hated myself," she says. "I never realised that it actually can really tear you down to be hating yourself so much." That experience is immortalised on her new album with the swoony "A Night to Remember", studded with lush keys that flutter like your heart does when you start falling in love.

As per usual, Ulven plays nearly every instrument on the album, which she recorded across a handful of European studios and her Oslo apartment. But this time, her signature brand of bedroom pop is polished to a high gloss that she's only slightly worried fans will find off-putting. "I feel like I'm a completely different person," she says. "So the music on this album, for me, doesn't sound so different from what I've done before. It just sounds like exactly what I'd make right now."

In her classic fashion, the album ping-pongs between highs and lows. Opener "I'm Back" creeps in almost bashfully, with Ulven proclaiming: "I'm back, I feel like myself/I was gone for a minute/'Cause I went to get help". The switch flips with "Doing It Again Baby", a bombastic strut of a song, and the first one she wrote for the record after compulsively picking out the melody during soundchecks. "That song is about feeling like I have so much self-esteem that I feel like I'm a cocky-ass bitch walking down the streets with my sunglasses on," she says.

Still, the bravado isn't a constant – single "Too Much" is about being just that (her mum was always telling her to quiet down), while tracks like "Phantom Pain" and "Pick Me" remind us that Ulven wasn't always so lucky in love. Sabrina Carpenter does help her go scorched-earth on an ex, though, on "You Need Me Now". The two singers both gained big new audiences last year as openers on separate legs of Swift's Eras Tour, but they've been friends since around 2022 – Ulven says they formed a mutual-appreciation society in each other's DMs before she asked Carpenter to guest on the dark rocker of a track for her new album.

"When she reached out to me, it felt like a no-brainer and I was immediately drawn to the record," Carpenter says. "It was exciting to make because it pushed me into new sonic territory."

Ulven is perhaps most herself on the ominous, echoey "Ugly Side", in which she grapples with feeling like Jeykll and Hyde – torn between being "cute" and "lovable" and "boiling inside."

In a lot of ways, she's always existing between dichotomies, whether that means feeling distinctly uncomfortable attending New York Fashion Week shows by hip designers like Tory Burch, Khaite, and Eckhaus Latta while she's in town ("I'm a very basic girl when it comes to clothes," she says) or proclaiming on her album's title track: "My big fat ego is making me say/This '99 vintage has impeccable taste!"

"I have these incredible highs, and then I have these very low lows," Ulven says as the waiter whisks away our plates. "Maybe that's good. I don't want to be just one thing. I don't want to be just this confident person who never doubts themselves. I think doubt can be great as much as it can be very paralysing."

She pauses for a moment. "Yeah. I just need to chill the fuck out... I think that's exactly what I need to do." There's a first time for everything.

BRENNA ERLICH

### FAST FACTS

**SWIFT THINKING**
On the Eras Tour, Ulven says, she and Taylor Swift chatted about the challenges of making a second album and writing from perspectives other than your own.

**ART POP**
The cover of her new album is a massive sculpture that she commissioned in Oslo.

**YES, CHEF**
She's a big fan of *The Bear* and star Jeremy Allen White.

GROOMING BY MELISSA DEZARATE AT A-FRAME AGENCY USING KEVIN MURPHY AND DR. SEBAGH. PREVIOUS PAGE: JACKET BY SAINT LAURENT BY ANTHONY VACCARELLO. SHIRT BY ACNE STUDIOS. THIS PAGE: OUTFIT BY CELINE BY HEDI SLIMANE. JEANS BY ACNE STUDIOS. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY NICHOLSON BAIRD. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY LIZIE BEN SHMUEL. STYLING BY LUCY GASTON.

PROFILE

# How Hannah Einbinder *Hacks* It in the Comedy World

***She grew up with a 'Saturday Night Live' great, but the actress doesn't take her recent success for granted***

**By KASE WICKMAN**

SANDY HONIG

YOU WOULD BE FORGIVEN FOR mistaking Hannah Einbinder for Ava Daniels, the character she plays on HBO's *Hacks*. The actor shares certain similarities with the comedy writer she's portrayed for two seasons now, like their dry delivery, which leaves you less than 100 per cent sure of whether they're fucking with you until they crack a smirk and let you in on the joke. That's not all, though.

"We're both the same age, and we have the same face and body, of course," Einbinder shares. "She looks exactly like me. That's some *Inside the Actors Studio* stuff, a look behind the curtain."

See also: Dry delivery.

But really, Einbinder, 28, found widespread recognition (including twin Outstanding Supporting Actress Emmy nominations) in her mid-twenties with *Hacks*, the same age that Ava is while finding her groove as a writing partner to comedian Deborah Vance (played by Jean Smart, who has her own pair of Best Actress statues for the show), an elder stateswoman of comedy struggling to stay both relevant and creatively fulfilled in the time of TikTok. Einbinder has her own comedic legacy influence in her life: Her mother, Laraine Newman, was part of the original cast of a little-known variety show called *Saturday Night Live* in 1975.

Yes, Ava walks and talks like Einbinder, with the actor saying that "as time has gone on, I've imbued her with my affect," but "there are just as many fundamental differences" between them. For one thing, Ava is a Virgo. Einbinder? "Classic Gemini."

Season Three of *Hacks* continues the ongoing rom-com (no happily ever after guaranteed) between Ava and Deborah. They say that if you really love something, you should set it free, which is exactly what Deborah was going for when she fired Ava in the Season Two finale after the pair pulled off a coup with Deborah's self-financed stand-up comeback special.

"She knows Deborah is running away from stability," Einbinder says. "Pushing Ava away because she's scared."

A year later in the show's timeline, Ava and Deborah are estranged. They're professionally successful, if a little bored, and Ava is playing house with her girlfriend, preoccupied with the minutiae of TripAdvisor ratings for a vacation she wants to go on while the show she writes for is on hiatus; and Deborah can't be bothered to show up for the unveiling of a slot machine with her face on it. Things are... fine.

"Of course that only lasts so long, and Ava blows it up to return to Deborah," Einbinder says, arid. Part of that blowing up of Ava's life also leads to whatever was going on in those set photos of Einbinder getting hot and heavy with guest star Christina Hendricks, which set the internet ablaze. Einbinder declined to share many spoilery details, but she says she's looking forward to the audience's reaction to that episode. Things get so steamy that perhaps it'll get... sweaty?

"Things on *Hacks*, when it comes to the hot and heavy, it's only hot and heavy for so long, and then the comedy slides in," she says. "The scene is explosive, of course, on that level, but also it's really fucking funny and so outrageous and insane."

Though she's the daughter of a comedy great, who will be portrayed in the upcoming movie *SNL 1975* by Emily Fairn, Einbinder says she's most benefited from her mum's hindsight. Newman was 23 when *SNL* premiered, not too far off from Einbinder's age when she snagged the co-lead in *Hacks*. However, "my mum was a drug addict and kind of on her own in the world" when *SNL* came a-calling. "She didn't really have a solid support system, and *SNL* is a famously chaotic place," Einbinder says. "So I have certainly benefited from her sober wisdom about those early days."

And that sad-clown trope exists for a reason: You've gotta laugh to keep from crying, and sometimes the business of comedy is anything but a barrel of laughs. Einbinder takes her professional and personal growth seriously: She watches herself on episodes of *Hacks* "like a football player watching game tape" and reads self-help books to learn, in her words, "how to be not shitty." She has a leg up in the comedy world, but she's not skipping days at the gym, so to speak.

"At one point, I asked her if she thought I could do it," Einbinder says of following in her mum's footsteps. "And she said, 'Nothing is guaranteed. I think you're funny, but that doesn't always yield results'. She never really blew smoke about the reality of this."

And that message, as we watch Einbinder, as Ava, stumble and recover, is never more clear than in *Hacks*.®

# Pond on the Double

PROFILE

***Nick Allbrook, frontman for Perth psych rockers Pond, talks going large on the band's first ever double album***

**By JAMES JENNINGS**

IT'S THE DAY AFTER psychedelic rock band Pond have opened for US rock royalty Queens of the Stone Age in Sydney, and the Western Australian five-piece's singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Nick Allbrook has just done the most un-rock star thing imaginable: gone for a lengthy run.

"I wanted to try and change the oil – we got a little bit pissed last night, so I need to flush the system," says Allbrook with a laugh. "It's tough, but you just gotta do it. I just tell myself it feels worse than this after the 30th kilometre of a marathon, so I may as well just do it."

Allbrook's post-show hangover comes as little surprise when he reveals his pre-show ritual involves the time-honoured rock 'n' roll tradition of downing hard liquor before hitting the stage.

"Before the show it's just heaps of shit talking and a big cup of tequila and ice and some pineapple juice," says Allbrook. "For a while I was really trying to do vocal warm ups. But I don't think I know how to do them properly, so I just wore my voice out. And then I did the opposite thing, where I was trying to keep real quiet, and that didn't work either. So I just gave up and now just employ the old tequila technique."

A regular participant in marathons, Allbrook says his fitness regime, surprisingly, doesn't assist much when it comes to gig stamina.

"I still manage to puff myself out on stage," he says. "I thought, 'OK, surely if you can do a 50 to 60km race, then [a show] is going to be a piece of piss. But last night, I was lying on the ground in the middle of the set, just feeling my lungs and heart pumping. Still, I'm from the Peter Garrett camp, which is if you're not covered in sweat and fucked by the time you get off stage, then you haven't really done your job."

Although they're currently on the road with Josh Homme and co. ("They are so nice, just lovely, lovely guys"), Allbrook and the rest of Pond will be hitting the road throughout June and July to play headline shows in support of *Stung!*, the band's first double album.

"I don't know what [a double album] even means in the streaming world, but I've been wanting to do this sort of *Tusk*, *Exile on Main St*. collective brain-dump album for ages," says Allbrook. "Because they're always my favourite albums, where there's weird little interludes and a really wide variation of moods. And I guess in that *Exile on Main St*. way, [*Stung!* is] also a healing album as well.

"For the last couple of albums, we've been trying to nail down the ever-elusive aesthetically cohesive album, and I think we kind of did that with the last one [2021's *9*]. It all sounds like one album of nine songs, and every one is good. But I've always loved albums like *The Love Below*

MICHAEL TARTAGLIA

by Andre 3000 – stuff where there's just all these little skits and there's like a jazz song and there's a couple of big bangers on there. And then there's like, instrumental weirdness. It's just my favourite thing – I get a real kick out of albums like that."

Despite music that can often feel bright and joyous, Allbrook admits there's also a lot of "dumping all the horror and trauma into songs" when it comes to writing music for Pond.

"On this album, there's definitely a lot of moving through loneliness," he says, singling out album track "Sunrise For The Lonely", the first song that he wrote for the project. "There's also the tried and tested Nick Allbrook tropes I use, for example 'Constant Picnic', which is about Australia, and not ever being able to be one with the land that we're actually on, and just sort of importing a British way of thinking, eating and dressing. It's that sort of stuff, but it's pretty varied."

Despite the heavy subject matter, Allbrook stresses that keeping Pond's trademark weirdness and whimsy alive is also a crucial ingredient in the band's creative process and overall identity.

"Being filled with wonder and passion is so important to me, and that's what the word 'stung' means to us," explains Allbrook. "It's kind of a dumb thing we always say. At first, we said 'I'm stung' to mean having a crush on someone, and then it just became, 'I'm real stung by this restaurant', 'man, I'm real stung by the trees in Sydney', or whatever. It just became a through-line for me that means keeping joy and wonder in your music and your life even through really, really tough and trying times, both personally and globally, I suppose. Because everything just seems to get harder and harder and more disconnected and you have to make more and more of an effort to be happy."

Now 10 albums into a career that began in 2008, Allbrook takes great pride in where Pond are at in 2024.

"We're enjoying ourselves more now that our teenage egos have settled down, the songs are better and the shows are better," he says. "From sitting in a sharehouse we all lived in together, ripping cones and listening to Todd Rundgren, we've somehow managed to have somewhat of a career.

"I'm proud that we've stuck through all the bullshit and all of the silliness and pressure. We've never had onstage walk offs, although it has definitely come close many, many times. No one's become a junkie, although it's come really close. And no one's had a mental breakdown, even though it's been pretty close. We've sort of just managed to keep our hands on the wheel and we're all pretty solid for it, I think.

"We've had a great run, man, what a dream come true. And we're still great friends – I think that's what I'm proud of the most." ®

**"We're enjoying ourselves more now that our teenage egos have settled."**

SHURE

20★24

# Rolling Stone AUSTRALIA AWARDS

Alex Dyson and Joel Turner working the crowd

Peach PRC

Neil Finn

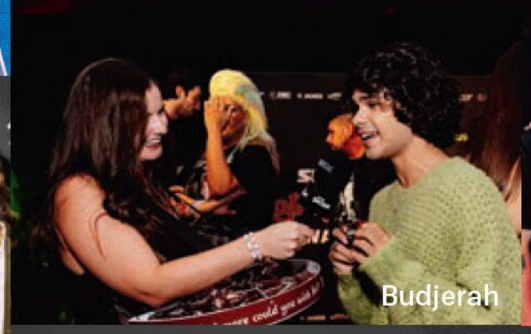

The Teskey Brothers



Angus and Julia Stone

Jeremy Dylan

Vacations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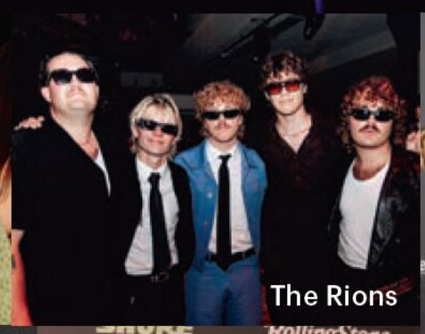

The Rions

Battlesnake

Mia Rodriguez

Teen Jesus and the Jean Teasers

Imogen Clark

Neil Finn and Dylan Wright

Oliver Cronin


Poppy Reid with Angus and Julia Stone



Kita Alexander


DMA'S


thatboykwame


Jimi and Tash Sultana

Tones And I

WINNER

# CROWDED HOUSE

## *ICON AWARD*

WINNER

# TONES AND I

## *GLOBAL AWARD*

**NOMINEES**

Kylie Minogue • Troye Sivan
Dom Dolla • Fisher
The Teskey Brothers • DMA'S
Vacations • Tame Impala

WINNER

*The Winding Way*

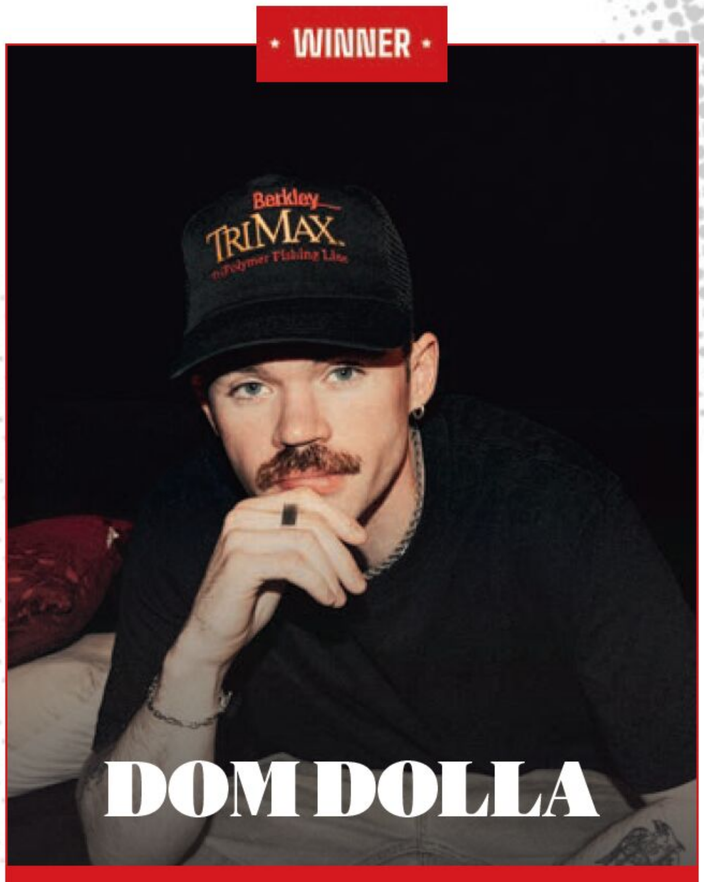
# THE TESKEY BROTHERS

## *BEST RECORD*

**NOMINEES**

**Teenage Dads** *Midnight Driving*
**G Flip** *Drummer* • **Brad Cox** *Acres*
**The Amity Affliction** *Not Without My Ghosts*
**Troye Sivan** *Something To Give Each Other*
**Dope Lemon** *Kimosabé*
**Peach PRC** *Manic Dream Pixie*

WINNER




# DOM DOLLA

## *BEST NEW ARTIST*

**NOMINEES**

**Royel Otis • Oliver Cronin**
**The Rions • grentperez**
**Teen Jesus and the Jean Teasers**
**Blusher • Old Mervs**

WINNER

*"Perfect For You"*

# PEACH PRC

## *BEST SINGLE*

**NOMINEES**

**Dom Dolla ft. MK** "Rhyme Dust"
**Lime Cordiale** "Colin" • **Budjerah** "Therapy"
**Tkay Maidza ft. Flume** "Silent Assassin"
**Fisher ft. Kita Alexander** "Atmosphere"
**Teen Jesus and the Jean Teasers** "I Used To Be Fun"
**Amy Shark** "Can I Shower At Yours?"

PROFILE

# Allday's Italian Job

*The Australian rapper on how working on a Sicilian olive farm led to the creation of his accomplished new album* **The Necklace**

By JAMES JENNINGS

WHEN A RECORDING artist has three Top 10 ARIA albums and over 250 million total streams to their name, the last thing you'd expect them to do is retreat from music entirely and start working on an Italian olive farm.

Yet that's exactly what Adelaide-born rapper Allday did after the release cycle of 2021's *Drinking with My Smoking Friends,* an album that saw the artist born Tom Gaynor take a detour into the world of indie-pop.

"I had been in this cycle of album-tour, album-tour, so I needed to do something else to clear my head before I got back into the grind," says the 33-year-old. "I wanted to do something weird, so I went and worked on an olive farm for a few months. It was hot and difficult and I didn't speak any Italian, so pretty quickly I was like, 'Actually, the studio doesn't seem so hard anymore.' It was fucking hard work and my family's all Irish, so I'm very pale – I'm not cut out for the Sicilian sun! So the whole experience put things in perspective."

The rigours of olive farming and a reignited love for rap music were the catalyst for the creation of Gaynor's excellent fifth LP *The Necklace*, which started taking shape in Australia before he relocated to the UK to make inroads in a foreign market he had yet to fully conquer.

"We were locked down for quite a while in Melbourne, so I thought maybe I needed to just try something else," he says. "I've been trying my whole career to spread my music everywhere, so that's still a big goal for me to move toward. I've got some audience [in the UK] but I just want to make it bigger."

Rather than feel like he was starting from square one, the challenge of building up a fan base in a new country is one that Gaynor relishes.

"Here it's similar to where I was in Australia a number of years ago, but that can be fun," he says. "Just getting to play those shows where you're playing a one-foot stage and looking people in the face – you've just gotta have the energy to rock with them from the beginning again. I'm down for that sort of thing – you don't want to be the guy who just wants to rest on his laurels and be like, 'I'm known here, so I'll just stay'. It's probably a good strategy, but I'd rather burn all my money trying to make it everywhere."

That sense of ambition and focus is apparent throughout *The Necklace*, which his record label is touting as a concept album based on a real-life event: a girl Gaynor was seeing found a woman's necklace at his place that wasn't hers.

"I think it maybe stops short of being a total concept album. To me, a concept album is like Masta Ace's *A Long Hot Summer,* which is something that's very specific," he says. "But for me, [*The Necklace*] had like a clear theme, so about halfway through making it I was like, 'Maybe I just need to stop trying to protect myself in the lyrics and stop trying to portray myself as always being a good guy'. I knew it was going to be better if I admitted to my own faults. That opened up a thing with me, and I thought about the necklace [incident], which was a time when I was really lost in the sauce with music stuff and just being like 'the rap guy'."

Gaynor says this period of self-reflection led to some personal growth and a newfound level of honesty in his music.

"I started to acknowledge 'This is the truth of what I have been', where I was skirting the line between saying the semi-misogynistic things that you say in rap songs versus being aware that that's actually not very good," he says. "I feel like there's moments on the album I'm doing normal subject matter and in other moments, I'm sort of expressing guilt for that."

The music on *The Necklace* was also created with pushing things forward artistically in mind, with the album's epic first song, "Toxic", featuring a gospel choir – a result of Gaynor attending one of Kanye West's 'Sunday Service' events in Los Angeles a few years ago.

"Kanye's definitely my biggest inspiration musically, although obviously I don't agree with everything he's ever said," he says. "I was invited to a Sunday Service in LA with a massive gospel choir, and it was so special. I was crying my eyes out – it was beautiful."

Attending a private event with one of the world's biggest artists demonstrates how far Gaynor has come in the last decade, with his popular debut album, *Startup Cult*, celebrating its tenth anniversary this year.

**"If you're only doing what you think the audience wants, that's a trap in itself. You've got to follow what you want, and most of the time, they will like it."**

"I'm blessed and thankful for the people who have engaged with my music because it means something to them," he says. "I didn't even start making music properly till I was 20 because it didn't seem like a realistic hope. I didn't have a microphone or a laptop so I'd just write bars on the notepad app of my desktop computer at home. It's been a crazy ride."

Ten years into the game, Gaynor says he feels no pressure to stay on top of the latest rap trends to sound relevant to a modern audience.

"I'm naturally taking in a lot of what's current, but then trying to do something that feels right to me," he says. "On this record I'm not insecure about it being too 'chasing the moment', which I've definitely done at times. I've learned my lesson.

"If you're only doing what you think the audience wants, that's a trap in itself. You've got to follow what you want, and most of the time, they will like it. Otherwise, I might as well be working back on the olive farm." ®

BOB FOSTER

IN THE BLACK

# The Amy Winehouse Business Is Booming

*Thirteen years after the retro-soul singer's death, tribute bands, album reissues, and a new biopic are keeping her rebel spirit alive*

**By DAVID BROWNE**

AS ANTHONY D'AMATO PREPS backstage at Sony Hall in midtown Manhattan, it's hard not to notice his six-foot height, horn-rimmed glasses – and the name "Amy" in large black letters on the side of his head. It's not a tattoo, just black liquid eyeliner easy to wash off, but it suits the occasion. In a few minutes, the New Jerseyan and his 12-piece band will walk onstage, take their places beneath an LED sign lit up with Amy Winehouse's first name and a simulation of her signature beehive, and play her *Back to Black* album start to finish – and hardly for the first time, either. "I really never imagined that it would become something that I would have done maybe 200 times at this point," says D'Amato, who uses the stage name Remember Jones. "My queer friends, all people of colour, my mum – everybody knew who Amy Winehouse was."

In July 2011, Winehouse was found dead of alcohol poisoning at her home in the Camden neighbourhood in London. She left behind a mere two albums (including the 2006 retro-pop classic *Back to Black*) and a checkered personal life plagued by addiction, marriage, divorce, and a million paparazzi photos documenting it all. In the years since, her musical and cultural influence have only grown. Lana Del Rey, Adele, Lady Gaga, and Future have all cited her as an influence; Miley Cyrus and Måneskin have covered her songs onstage. D'Amato's show is merely one of many tribute acts working around the world, from the US and the UK to Serbia and Slovenia, many featuring Winehouse look-alike singers sporting her trademark hairstyle, winged eyeliner, pumps, and miniskirts.

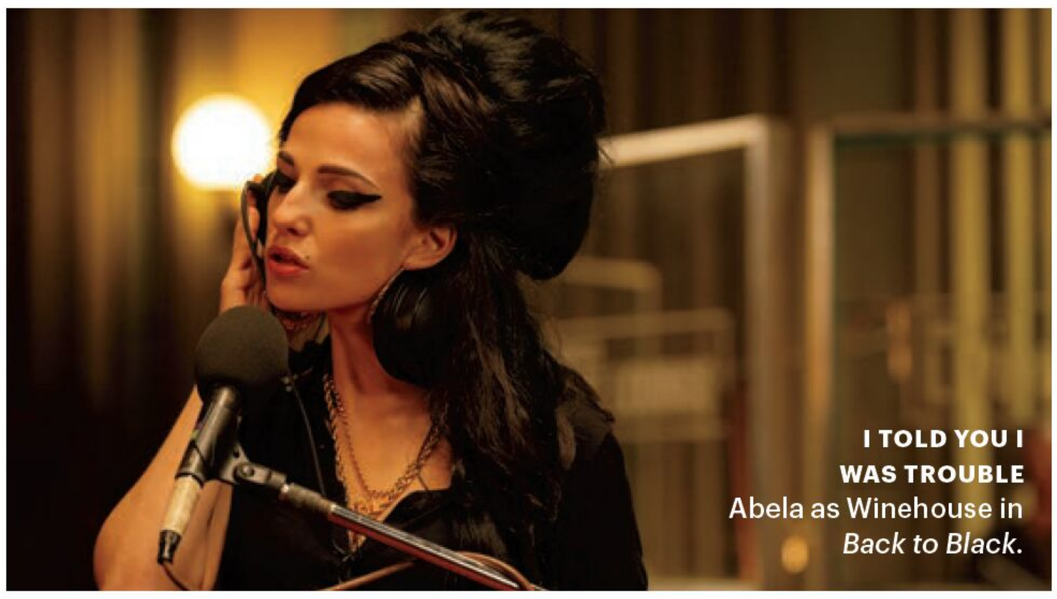
Fans can make a pilgrimage to Camden to see a life-size bronze statue of Winehouse erected in her honour in 2014. (Early this year, to protest Israel's attacks in Gaza, someone covered the Star of David necklace on the statue with a sticker of a Palestinian flag.) For $210,000, Winehouse die-hards – who call themselves either Winettes or Cherries (after her song "Cherry") – could even own the nearly 230 books in her personal library. A few years ago, the Washington, D.C., rare-books dealer Type Punch Matrix bought the collection at a charity auction organised by Winehouse's family and is now offering it for sale. The collection includes books on her hero Frank Sinatra, Jackie Collins novels, bios of musicians who battled addiction (Anthony Kiedis, Jimi Hendrix), a copy of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* with an unfinished lyric tucked inside, and certain volumes with obvious wear and tear. "It's pretty clear she was reading some of these in the bathtub, or lighting candles in her apartment and these were under them," says Type Punch Matrix co-owner Brian Cassidy. "The condition helps tell the story and speaks to the life." One book sports a lipstick kiss. "I can't prove it's Amy's," Cassidy says, "but I'm pretty sure."

At the same time, the musical-industrial complex around Winehouse has expanded. Her legacy now includes more than a dozen reissues, compilations, live recordings, and documentaries. This year, the reissue of her 2003 debut, *Frank*, will be commemorated with a new edition and video for "In My Bed". April saw the arrival of *Back to Black*, a biopic directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson (who also helmed the John Lennon biopic *Nowhere Boy*). During filming, the director herself noticed Winehouse's ubiquity. "You walk into a restaurant, she's singing," Taylor-

Johnson says. "You walk around the corner, there's a mural. You walk into a shop, there's a poster. You see people with a T-shirt or a scarf. It feels everywhere all the time."

When Winehouse died, much was made of her age – 27, the same as Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, and others in the so-called "27 Club". At the time, comparisons to those rock legends felt a little premature, but 13 years after her death, they've been proven true. One of the first major pop stars of the millennium, Winehouse is now the equivalent of a Cobain or Morrison for the generation who came of age with pop in this century, and with a fan base and industry to match. "She's in the same breath, not just biographically but artistically," says Cassidy. "There's tragedy there, but also a lot of joy and creativity. There's something very archetypal about her life."

As her former bass player Dale Davis says, "You get these people who come along once a generation and just change everything up completely. So it doesn't surprise me in the slightest that interest is still there. It's a short career, like Cobain, but the impact is massive, isn't it?"



I TOLD YOU I WAS TROUBLE
Abela as Winehouse in *Back to Black*.

**"You get these people who come along once a generation and just change everything up completely. The impact is massive, isn't it?"**

WHEN TRYING TO PINpoint the moment that the posthumous Winehouse industry kicked into gear, all roads point to *Amy*, director Asif Kapadia's 2015 documentary. The film made $36 million worldwide, an exceptional number for a doc of any sort, and won the Oscar for best documentary. "There was interest right after that," says Sony Music Publishing executive Chris Jones, who oversees the licensing of her songs.

Soon after the film, Davis was approached about reuniting Winehouse's touring band behind an Amy-style frontperson. Originally called Forever Amy and since renamed the Amy Winehouse Band, the UK-based tribute show re-creates a standard Winehouse set list. "If we're going to give people the feeling of how it was," Davis says, "I thought it was easier to stick to an original show and have the same format."

Davis, who admits he had concerns about the idea, says he experienced an unsettling moment during one of the group's early shows in 2016, when an Italian singer was performing as Winehouse. "My bass guitar wouldn't stay in tune for the whole night," he says. "At that point, I thought Amy was trying to tell me something." But after seeing emotional fans at shows and hearing from another that their mother was dying – and attended the show so she could have a Winehouse experience before she passed – Davis reconciled with his decision. Save for a period during the pandemic, the Amy Winehouse Band has been working ever since. Davis also says that Amy's father, Mitch Winehouse (who declined comment for this story), saw a show and gave his blessing: "He found it very emotional."

Both the Winehouse Band and D'Amato's "Back to Back to Black" shows purposefully avoid lead singers who replicate Winehouse's look; the Winehouse Band's current frontperson, Bronte Shande, sports neither beehive nor Amy-style makeup. "I want someone to have the spirit of Amy like Bronte does," Davis says. "I've worked with the original Amy. I don't need to work with someone who looks like her." D'Amato, whose show features both him and several different male and female singers, also has mixed feelings about lookalike acts. "I don't knock it, but some of them are just not great," he says. "The singer can't quite sing it or doesn't pull off the thing. You can't really try to copy Amy."

Not every Winehouse-related project has panned out. A hologram tour, in which Davis and her old band would have accompanied a simulated Winehouse, was announced in 2018 but fell through for reasons that remain unclear. But overall, the business of Winehouse appears to be in healthy shape. According to one industry source, her publishing catalogue is likely valued at nearly 20 times its annual earnings (on the high end of such evaluations). Last year, Openville Ltd., the private company directed by her divorced parents, Mitch and Janis, that oversees that business, had equity of about $3.1 million. According to Royalty Exchange, which allows investors to buy shares of royalties of select songs, Winehouse's catalogue is "highlighted by consistent, still-growing earnings" and is "above the 75th percentile of all catalogs analysed by Royalty Exchange." Last year, the video for "Back to Black" vaulted past one billion views on YouTube, 17 years after its release.

The Winehouse windfall continues with the release of *Back to Black*, which stars British actress Marisa Abela and traces Winehouse's life from her teen years through her death. "Interest has been steady over the last five, six years," says Jones. "I think the film will boost that significantly." Rockabilia, the online store that sells officially licensed music merch, is predicting a surge in its Winehouse T-shirt sales. "We've definitely seen an uptick in Bob Marley with the movie that just came out," says co-owner Frankie Blydenburgh. "I think Amy will pick up for sure."

During the filming of *Back to Black*, photos of Abela as Winehouse made their way around the internet, much to the displeasure of some Winehouse fans. "It's a fucking sick joke – Amy would be pissed off at this shit", wrote a fan in a typical sentiment. Davis witnessed the outcry for himself. "I've had people who are supposedly friends of mine on my Instagram feed saying, 'Let's make a petition to stop the film'," he says. "It's so fresh in people's minds, and they have a lot of opinions." Adds Taylor-Johnson, "You're like, 'You're judging an entire movie on one picture'. I think people are nervous, and all I can say is I treated her with reverence, respect, and everything she deserved."

The fervency of Winehouse's fan base may recall that of past rock legends, but it also brings with it a new twist. Her breakthrough coincided with the rise of social media, and the way her life was so publicly on display connected with members of a generation who've lived their lives on social media as well. "Seeing her and some of her struggles, some people identify with it instead of sensationalising it," says D'Amato. "They think, 'She's more like me'."

After his band's 90-minute show, which included favorites like "Valerie" and "Fuck Me Pumps", D'Amato was approached by a fan with a Winehouse tattoo on her arm. "This happens pretty often," he says later. "I always thought I should be taking a photo with the people who show me their tattoos. To put Amy on your skin, it's got to connect to you in a deep way." ®

CHARLES MORIARTY/FOCUS FEATURES

RollingStone

# future 25 of music

# PEACH PRC

**A DISTINCTIVE** pop star that only comes around once in a generation. Beloved by fans for her confessional songwriting and signature style, Peach PRC is primed for global dominance. And yet she refuses to rest on her laurels. Spurred on by having her debut EP, *Manic Dream Pixie*, top the Australian charts last year, the viral sensation recently told *Rolling Stone AU/NZ* she's now looking towards the future with newfound artistic freedom. Peach seems to create glistening pop anthems, including new single "Secret" and the Paris Hilton-approved "Perfect for You", as if it's the easiest thing in the world to do. But fans know she's been working tirelessly to hone her skills ever since first blooming on TikTok at the beginning of the decade.

Today's emerging artists, those that somehow sliced their way through the digital fuzz and face a collapsing live circuit, are not to be sympathised with, but celebrated, simply by the miracle of their existence. If an artist has managed to stand out from an imposingly competitive crowded field in 2024, they deserve all the praise and admiration in the world.

That's where the **Future of Music** series comes in. In conjunction with our global *Rolling Stone* partners, our editorial team has compiled a **list of 25 of the most exciting and innovative artists from Australia and Aotearoa.** These are the artists who are destined for the very top. These are the artists who you'll be hearing a lot from in 2024 and beyond.

by conor lochrie & sarah downs

PEACH PRC - JESS GLEESON,TEEN JESUS - MICHELLE PITIRIS, G-FLIP - NAZRIN MASSARO, BUDJERAH - THERAPY

# teen jesus and the jean teasers

**CANBERRA-BORN** punk rockers Teen Jesus and the Jean Teasers thrive performing both raucous anthems and slow-burning ballads, a not-insignificant loud-quiet blend to have at your disposal in this era of guitar music. Fuelled by Riot Grrrl inspiration and a whole lot of heart, the band's 2023 debut album, *I Love You*, confirmed the hype surrounding the four-piece was real. Their songs flit between Nineties-indebted rock, steely punk and even bubblegum pop, a varied style that led them to secure a support slot for Foo Fighters in Melbourne at the end of last year. For all the gusto and vibrancy showcased in *I Love You*, though, its standout moment is its most vulnerable, when drummer Neve van Boxsel details her reaction to being sexually assaulted on "Never Saw It Coming".

## g flip

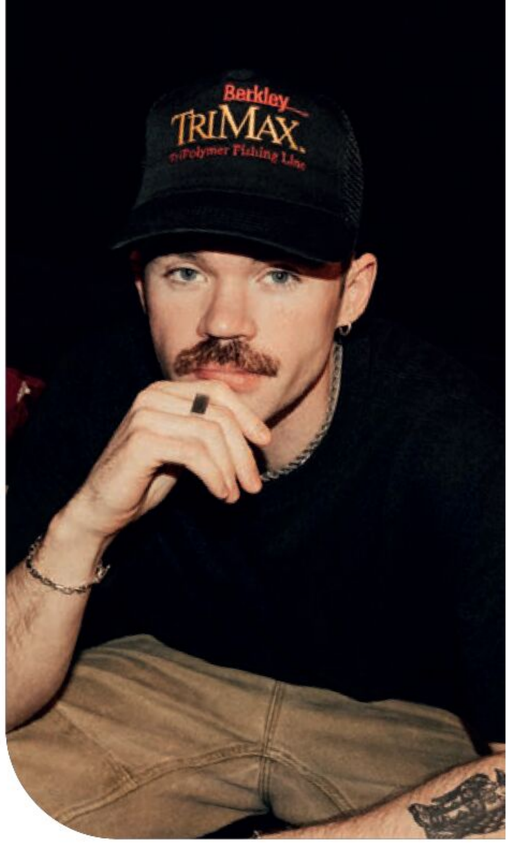
**G FLIP IS THE MULTI-INSTRUMENTALIST** spinning heads worldwide, reinventing solo pop with their drum-focused flair. One of the most prominent drummers in modern music, G Flip memorably performed live and played drums at a trio of shows with just one hand due to an injury in 2022, the sort of moment that gains respect and admiration for years. Their eagerly awaited second album, *Drummer* (what else would it be called?), lived up to the anticipation last year, overflowing with killer vocals and, of course, mind-melting percussion skills. G Flip is the drummer marching to their own beat, and more and more people are rightly following behind them.

## budjerah

**MULTIPLE ARIA** Awards before the age of 22. Best New Artist winner at the 2023 Rolling Stone Australia Awards. Ed Sheeran's stadium tour mate. Budjerah has already conquered Australia, and now the young pop sensation is coming for the rest of the world. To discover Budjerah's singing is to imagine what an older generation of Australians must have felt like encountering John Farnham for the first time: a heart-wrenching, soul-stirring voice that will be listened to and remembered for decades to come.
A proudly vulnerable performer, Budjerah's pleading vocals power his biggest hit to date, "Therapy", an ode to the importance of real communication in relationships. As Artist of the Year at last year's National Indigenous Music Awards, when Budjerah finally unveils his first full studio album, it will be one of the most exciting Australian debuts in recent memory.

## 9lives

**DID YOU KNOW** one of the 2020's most innovative artists hails from humble Hawke's Bay? Pioneer of the Sigilkore sound, a subgenre that draws on trap, hyperpop, cloud rap and electronic music, 9lives has caught the attention of US stars like Lil Nas X, Trippie Redd and Odetari. While the current 'Big Three' of rap bitterly bicker about their talent in a very public way, 9lives and the new generation of producers quietly go about their business, dropping endless streaming behemoths. 9lives — otherwise known as Max Jardine — already boasts over six million monthly listeners on Spotify, with that impressive figure growing by the week. Dubbed "the Metro Boomin of the underground", 9lives has tapped into a truly modern sound with Sigilkore: a stirring, messy-in-a-good-way, boundless genre-agnostic style.
"In high school, I was like, 'There's no way I'm gonna make it out of Hawke's Bay,'" Jardine once pondered. But talent like his will always find a way to be heard.




## dom dolla

**HOW DO YOU FOLLOW** earning your first Grammy nomination? By plotting your biggest-ever Australian tour, of course. Fred again.. may be the most fancied producer in the world right now, but Dom Dolla isn't far behind. Every big festival, from Coachella to Tomorrowland, wants one of the world's most in-demand house producers to grace its stage. Dom Dolla — Dominic Matheson to give him his full name — was named Best New Artist at the 2024 Rolling Stone Australia Awards, just reward for a stupendous breakout year in 2023. But the Melbourne-based producer has been steadfastly doing his thing for over a decade now. A slew of ARIA Gold and Platinum singles can be traced back to 2015, and there will be many more to come for Matheson.

## shouse

**THE ANTIPODEAN** electronic duo's retro-disco hit "Love Tonight" became a TikTok sensation in 2021, a sonic balm during the uncertainty of the pandemic. It even caught Kelly Clarkson's attention, and collaborations with Jason Derulo and David Guetta quickly followed. How do you follow such meteoric success? Ed Service and Jack Madin will inevitably find a way. Their first single of 2024, "Tonic", is a good start, a shimmering anthem with a melancholic flavour. "Shouse is collective ecstasy", the duo's Instagram bio declares. It's difficult to disagree with that statement upon listening to their brand of electronic music; their lightly euphoric songs urge you to pull your favourite people closer on the dancefloor, to live in the blissful present, devoid of stressors for the briefest of moments.

## blusher

**"GET IN LOSER,** Blusher are going dancing." The Melbourne pop trio pump out addictive anthems one after another, luring you to the dancefloor without hesitation. They place female friendship and joy at the heart of their infectious songs, and their fun-focused approach refuses to take music too seriously. Their debut EP was titled *Should We Go Dance?*, but it didn't have to be a question: the collection will undoubtedly have anyone moving. At their best, Blusher take listeners on a chaotic ride into the night, capturing in detail each tiny part, from getting ready with friends at home to having deep 'n' meaningful chats in the club bathroom in the early hours of the morning.

## brad cox

**AUSTRALIAN COUNTRY** music's most beloved current performer? It's very likely. Brad Cox has been a notable figure in country since his self-titled debut album dropped in 2018, but he took things up a notch on his third album, *Acres*, a powerful storytelling collection that remained faithful to country while also holding crossover appeal. Released last year, *Acres* brought Cox ARIA nominations, a trio of Golden Guitar wins, and the album also became his first to crack the Top 10 on the ARIA Albums Chart. Above the timeless music — always belted out through his instantly recognisable booming voice — it's Cox's relationship with his fans that makes him stand out. Wherever he performs in Australia, no matter how small the town, he always draws a passionate crowd; people just like Cox, who recognise themselves in his music.



9LIVES - CONNOR PRITCHARD, DOM DOLLA - PC @SHEVINDPHOTO, SHOUSE - SUPPLIED, BLUSHER - BRIANNA DA SILVA, BRAD COX - SUPPLIED

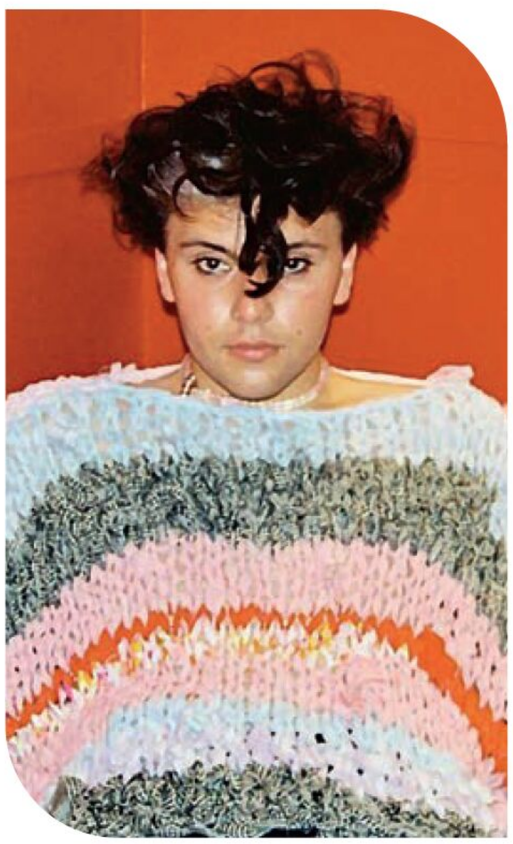
# good morning

**GOOD MORNING** have a strong claim to be the most underrated Australian band of their generation. The dreamy indie-pop duo have been releasing excellent records since 2014, but it's their new double album, *Good Morning Seven*, that's set to give them the wider notice they so deserve. Go through Liam Parsons and Stefan Blair's extensive catalogue and you'll find gems: the mournful lo-fi of "Warned You", by far their biggest streaming hit to date; the driving "Country", the memorable closing track to their 2021 album *Barnyard*; the one-two melancholic punch of "Take It Easy For Me, Stranger" and "Boy, I'm Just a Loser for Your Love"; the list could go on and on. *Good Morning Seven* barely peaked into the Top 100 on the ARIA Albums Chart upon its release in March — one doubts that commercial favour has ever been what matters to Parsons and Blair anyway — but it successfully enhances their plucky DIY pop in impressive ways. With a growing army of admirers overseas, Good Morning now turn their focus to a US tour with Waxahatchee. These two high school friends from Melbourne deserve such a prominent showcase for their music.

GOOD MORNING - POONEH GHANA, LUCA GEORGE - ABBY YEOMAN, PACIFIC AVENUE - CHARLIE HARDY, LILBUBBLEGUM - FRASER CHATHAM, MAY-A - SUPPLIED

# luca george

**ADMIRED BY TROYE SIVAN,** New Zealand has a future pop powerhouse in its midst. You can tell a lot about a person by the company they keep, and you can also tell a lot about an artist by who wants to work with them, so it felt notable that Sivan selected Luca George as the sole New Zealand artist to take part in his SongHubs songwriting camp. The fledgling Kiwi pop star flew to Sydney to take part in the camp, getting to work with top songwriters and producers from around the world. And a lot of the same qualities that helped Sivan rise to the top are prominent in George's music: sugary vocals, natural charisma and melancholic yet hopeful pop aesthetics. The Wanaka-born artist is ready for the world.



# pacific avenue

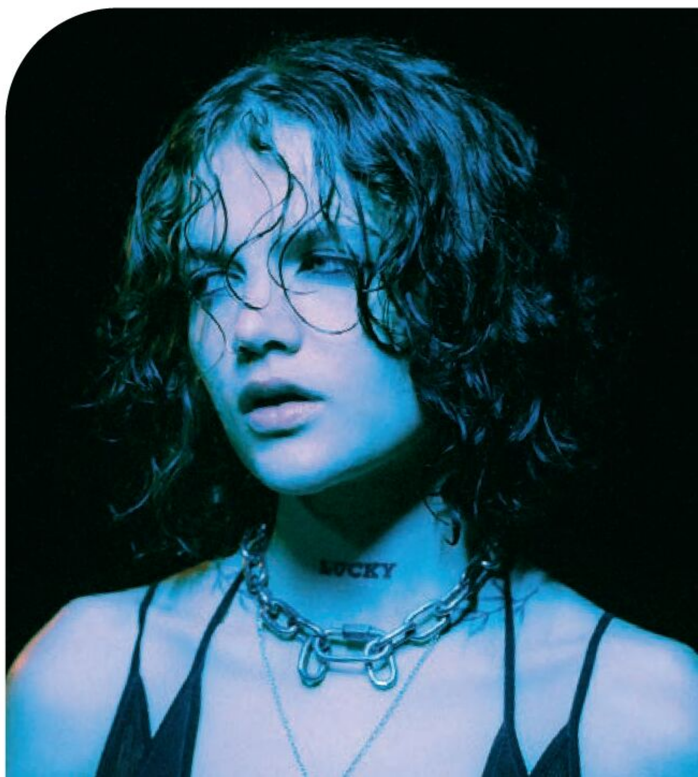
**TWO NOMINATIONS** at the 2023 ARIA Awards for your debut album? Pacific Avenue are flying out of the traps. From the coastal town of Gerringong in New South Wales, the rising alternative rock band deliver a fresh yet nostalgic sound with strong hooks, while their energetic live show is a sight to behold. After working hard to build up their reputation in their home country, Pacific Avenue's reward was a debut tour of New Zealand at the beginning of the year, where their sunshine-coated songs went down a storm with Kiwis.

# lilbubblegum

**LILBUBBLEGUM** has been out-performing your favourite rappers on streaming for a long time. After starting out in SoundCloud's underground scene making beats on his phone, the teen rapper from Te Atatu is now selling out venues across the United States.
At the 2023 Rolling Stone Aotearoa Awards, the up-and-comer was nominated for Best Single for the gripping "af1", a song blessed with a deliriously jazzy beat that draws you in for repeat listens. (Seriously, try to play "af1" just one time.) From Yung Gravy to Rico Nasty, bigger and bigger international names are now seeking out lilbubblegum's innate talent.

# may-a

**MAY-A** initially rose to prominence after topping triple j's Hottest 100 through her famous feature on Flume's "Say Nothing", but her new era is all about exploring her own musical vision. The Sydney singer-songwriter means business. Last year's EP, *ANALYSIS PARALYSIS*, found MAY-A coming out of her shell more than ever, writing pointedly and honestly. Having a Number One Hottest 100 before the age of 22 would go to some people's heads, but not MAY-A. Don't bet against her taking out the top spot on the countdown as a solo artist sometime soon.



## teenage dads

**IT SHOULD BE ILLEGAL** to be as good as Teenage Dads are at popping out buzzy anthem after anthem. Last year's winners of the Michael Gudinski Breakthrough Artist at the ARIA Awards are proving themselves to be an unstoppable indie rock force. After being nominated for Best New Artist at the 2022 Rolling Stone Australia Awards, they went one better last year with a nod for Best Album for their electrifying EP, *Midnight Driving*. Teenage Dads are also already one of the must-sees on the live circuit, and their commitment to touring as much as possible has only helped them fine-tune their breezy guitar music. A first win after several nominations at our awards feels inevitable at this point.

## mia rodriguez

**MIA RODRIGUEZ** has been on our radar for a while now — she was named Best New Artist at the 2021 Rolling Stone Australia Awards, after all — but it still feels like she's just getting started. It may sound silly to say this about someone who's already amassed over 40 million combined global streams, but Rodriguez is still only 21 years old, with no EP or album to her name. The next few years will be huge for the Sydney artist. A true TikTok success story, Rodriguez's exciting dark-pop songs and inimitable fashion style have helped her stand out on the social media platform, and she's now ready to carve out a corner for herself with a sound that sets her apart.

## grentperez

**EVERYTHING ABOUT GRENTPEREZ** feels fresh, from his genre-bending ability to the distinctive falsetto that's helped him find a unique lane in indie-pop. And the Filipino-Australian artist is barely out of his twenties. A collaboration with Lime Cordiale, a support slot for Rex Orange County and a North American headline tour are putting the precious artist on the global map. It might be neat to hail someone as a "Gen Z artist", but grentperez fully fits the bill, handling the jump from bedroom-pop unknown to international recognition with aplomb.

## jacoténe

**WINNING TRIPLE J** Unearthed High doesn't necessarily guarantee success, but the competition's past winner track record — Gretta Ray, The Rions and George Alice — suggests a bright future for the latest winner, JACOTÉNE.
The teenager's beautiful vocals draw comparisons to iconic vocalists like Amy Winehouse and Adele; JACOTÉNE possesses a voice that stuns and stops, demanding the volume is turned up. JACOTÉNE (pronounced "jack-oh-teen") only uploaded her Unearthed High entry, the soulful "I Need Therapy", days before the competition closed, but she's glad she did: her future as a mainstay in Australian pop and R&B awaits.

## coterie

**WHEREVER COTERIE GO**, wherever they play, the fun goes too. The NZ-born, WA-based brothers, named Best New Artist at last year's Rolling Stone Aotearoa Awards, are swiftly becoming Trans-Tasman favourites thanks to a winning sound that melds reggae, rock, and pop together. It's only a matter of time until Coterie are an unmissable name on festival bills worldwide, and it also feels like they are destined to follow the example of Six60 and L.A.B as the most dominant band on the Aotearoa charts. And if you're still doubting the credentials, just know this: the legendary Sir Dave Dobbyn approved of their cover of his classic hit "Slice of Heaven" so much that he deigned to guest on the reimagined version.

## angie mcmahon

**IN A COUNTRY** spoiled for choice when it comes to singer-songwriters, Angie McMahon still manages to stand out from her Australian (and global) peers. Her latest album, *Light, Dark, Light Again*, contains some of the most profoundly moving lyricism of the decade so far. It takes a special artist to make you feel less alone in the vastness of the world, but that's what McMahon achieves in her songs, instilling them with mantras that urge both her and her listeners to relinquish, breathe and find light through the darkness. We're lucky to have brave songwriters like McMahon embracing the feelings we're afraid to face.

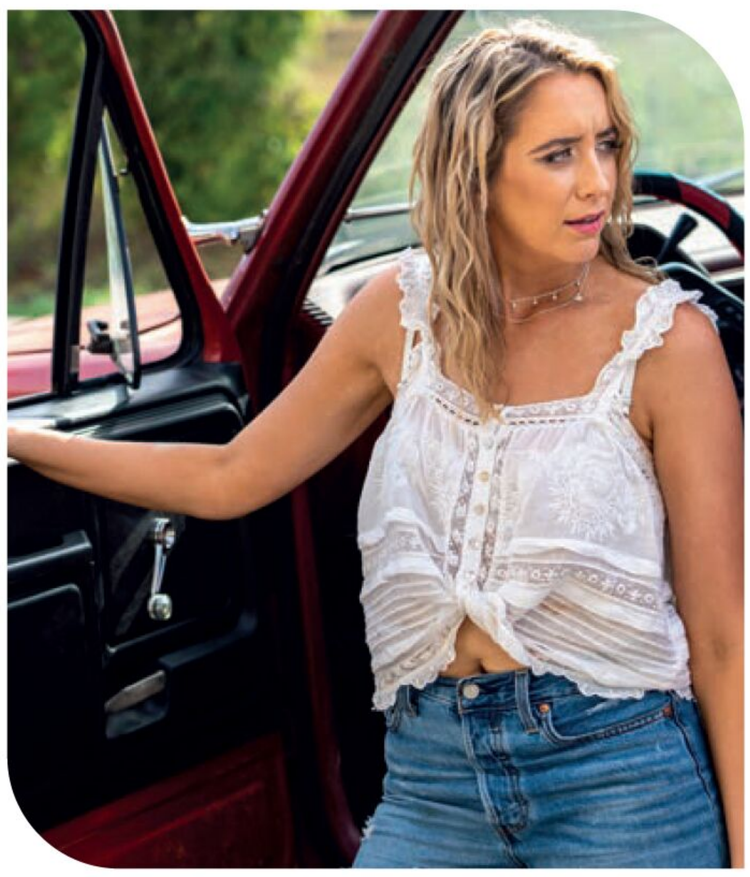
TEENAGE DADS - ALEX WALL, MIA RODRIGUEZ - CAMERON GRANT, GRENTPEREZ - SUPPLIED, JACOTÉNE - JOE-HOWAT, COTERIE - COTERIE, ANGIE MCMAHON - BRIDGETTE WINTEN

# daine

**CHARLI XCX IS THEIR MENTOR**, so it's no surprise daine is Australia's coolest purveyor of hyperpop. Praised by *Vogue*, BBC Radio 1, *Kerrang!*, *NME* and more, the "future emo icon" has a growing collection of irresistibly stylish songs. Their music drifts between genres with ease; pop, metal, and punk notes being wielded with glee. 2023's *shapeless* was one of the best EPs released last year and 2024 is already off to a flyer, with the high-octane banger "SHADES ON" and a support slot for heaving British rockers Bring Me the Horizon on their Australian tour. Backing all of this is a distinctly DIY ethos and a willing outspokenness on chronic pain and disability. It's daine's authenticity and courage to push boundaries that is helping them explode out from the underground.

# oliver cronin

**OLIVER CRONIN'S EDGY** dark-pop sound, which mixes hip-hop and trap elements, has grabbed both industry and fan attention. Following viral TikTok remixes and millions of streams, the ambitious Sydney-based artist now has new material slated for this year. The 2024 Rolling Stone Australia Awards Best New Artist nominee will be aiming to win big at next year's edition.



# kaylee bell

**IF BRAD COX** is the most promising country star in Australia, Kaylee Bell is his Kiwi counterpart. The Canterbury-born future country superstar has already made a name for herself in Nashville. With a CMA Global Award and US Billboard Country Charts success under her belt, her latest album, *Nights Like This*, was the cherry on top of her most triumphant career period yet. After winning the Toyota Star Maker award in Australia in 2013 (making her the first New Zealand-born artist to win since the one and only Keith Urban in 1990), Bell has taken her time to get to the top. Now she's here, don't expect her to leave anytime soon.

# clinton kane

**"VIRAL SENSATION"** is quickly becoming a redundant phrase, but there's really no better way to describe Clinton Kane. Starting with YouTube covers of the likes of Drake and 5 Seconds of Summer, the self-taught multi-instrumentalist has since garnered a huge international fanbase thanks to his emotionally charged and vulnerable songwriting. Kane's 2023 EP, *AND ALL I LOVED, I LOVED ALONE*, was his strongest collection of songs to date, the all-caps title matching the intensity of the vocals held within.

# royel otis

**AUSTRALIA'S NEXT** indie-pop darlings. If Good Morning had to bide their time to turn mainstream heads, there was no such wait for the elusive Royel Otis. The Sydney duo make guitar-led music sound like the coolest thing in the world, particularly on their acclaimed debut album, *Pratts & Pain*. That followed three promising EPs — 2021's *Campus*, 2022's *Bar & Grill* and 2023's *Sofa Kings* — and Royel Maddell and Otis Pavlovic's remarkable current hit rate is almost as impressive as their endlessly catchy songs.

DAINE - SUPPLIED, OLIVER CRONIN - BILLY-ZAMMIT, KAYLEE BELL - SUPPLIED, CLINTON KANE - SUPPLIED, ROYEL OTIS - ALEX WALL

# House

# *IS WHERE THE HEART IS*

**Crowded House welcome us into their private universe to talk about their new album, the magic of human connection and Neil Finn's relentless pursuit of the perfect pop song**

BY JAMES JENNINGS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GIULIA GIANNINI MCGAURAN

**Photograph by**
**Giulia Giannini McGauran**

GIULIA GIANNINI MCGAURAN

A PERFECT POP SONG is a kind of magic; a compact package of words and music that has the power to propel itself around the world, bring people from all walks of life together, and effectively outlive its creator, achieving immortality.

From the 1980 Split Enz smash "I Got You" to Crowded House's "Distant Sun" in 1993 and beyond, singer-songwriter Neil Finn is New Zealand's most prolific author of perfect pop songs, including what may be his most perfect of all: 1986's "Don't Dream It's Over", an international hit that still inspires spirited singalongs whenever it's played live.

Witnessing this communion from the vantage point of the Palais Theatre stage in Melbourne on a mild March night is a deeply moving experience. Audience members of all ages rise to their feet, sway in unison and sing their hearts out with unbridled joy. The shift in energy is palpable; the love for Crowded House deep and undeniable.

The band are in town for Global Citizen Nights, an event honouring young activists from across the Asia-Pacific region, and after a well-received mini-set of classics and a couple of songs off brand new album *Gravity Stairs*, I ask Finn, a boyish 65 despite his greying mop of hair, if the sight of a crowd singing his songs back to him after all these years still has the power to move him.

"It's something I never get tired of – I never get blasé about that exchange," he says. "Sometimes you get a sense of that with an audience – we start a song and you kind of feel a little intake of air, and you sense people moving forward a little bit. It's a ritual and if you get it right, you do sense that people are having some kind of release. And now it feels more special than it ever did because I'm just amazed at how songs endure and how they become part of people's lives. It becomes more evident as time goes on."

Finn believes the reason his sizeable catalogue of songs continues to resonate so strongly with people is due to the fact the meaning of them can be malleable, giving them the ability to apply to vastly different circumstances.

"There's something [the song] reminds them of, or it was a key moment in their life," he reasons. "For some people it can be a marker of a death, or a marker of a wedding or the birth of a child. It's just incredible how [the songs] turn up in different places, and people tell you these stories about what the songs mean to them."

Finn's oldest son Liam, 40, a successful solo artist in his own right, was a touring member of the band before joining full-time in 2020. He has, quite understandably,

**Photograph by**: Giulia Giannini McGauran
**Styling credits on page 44**

seen more memorable Crowded House gigs than most.

"We were playing a football stadium in Cork a few years ago, and it's probably the loudest crowd that I've ever heard sing the songs back. There's palpable energy and euphoria that you feel," he says. "I grew up watching people [react like] that to Dad's music since I was a kid, and I think that was a huge part of what was attractive to me about being a musician. To put on a show that provides hope and joy and escapism for people is meaningful."

American Mitchell Froom, 70, who produced Crowded House's first three albums, played keyboards and organ on "Don't Dream It's Over" and finally became a fully-fledged member in 2020, has an accurate take on why people in Australia, the band's biggest market, have such a deep connection to the music.

**"You don't get tired of seeing that emotional release happening all at once in an audience. I think it's given Dad the incentive to keep working hard, because it means a lot to him."**

***ELROY FINN***

"When I come here, it feels like a generational kind of thing, because there's the parents who loved Crowded House, but then there's the kids who loved growing up with it. So it's a very communal feeling, and it's beautiful," he says. "The way Neil writes music is very conducive to people being able to sing along to it. And he's always had that through his family – singalongs at home and all that kind of stuff."

Also joining the band in 2020 was Neil's youngest son Elroy, 35, currently drenched in post-show sweat due to a powerhouse drumming performance.

"You don't get tired of seeing that emotional release happening all at once in an audience; it's a powerful thing," he says. "I think it's given Dad the incentive to keep working so hard as well, because it means a lot to him."

**"There's no one in this world that cares about Crowded House as much as me and Elroy. It's part of our blood and we both saw an opportunity to help protect that legacy."**

***LIAM FINN***

The audience buzz shows no sign of dissipating as people spill out of the venue at the end of the night, snippets of overheard conversation singing the praises of Crowded House floating through the air – a reminder of how much the band means to fans, too.

EARLIER IN THE DAY, after dutifully signing posters and warmly greeting old friends, the band, rounded out by ebullient bassist Nick Seymour, 65 – the only member with a faint whiff of 'rock star' about him due to the kind of flamboyant glasses that only famous people can pull off – stroll around a deserted Luna Park to have their photograph taken.

For Seymour, a founding member of Crowded House when they formed in Melbourne in 1985 after Finn's 1984 exit from Split Enz, his hometown brings back a flood of memories. Even bittersweet ones of the band's beloved original drummer Paul Hester, who took his own life in 2005 at the age of 46.

"I'm reminded of Paul so much here. He was the king of this city for a time," Seymour recalls with a wide smile. "Just walking around with Paul Hester in Melbourne Central or St Kilda or Elwood... there was just so much goodwill towards him. He was the voice of the larrikin, disenfranchised, kind of don't-give-a-shit person."

I ask what Hester would make of the 2024 version of Crowded House, the one-time trio now a robust five-piece; three of them Finns.

"I think he would absolutely appreciate the fact that we can still go on these jammy little journeys in the middle of songs and have a live dynamic where you're flying by the seat of your pants," he says. "The chemistry that we have within Crowded House still mines that same seam of creativity [that we had then]."

Standing on a deck outside a decommissioned tram while a vertigo-inducing rollercoaster looms overhead, Neil Finn says the band's ties to Melbourne can't be overstated.

"There's so much history from over the years – the kids were born here. We lived here. The band started here. We did a lot of our earliest gigs here," he says. "I wrote probably 90 per cent of the early Crowded House songs in Melbourne, and they all have associations with times and places here... it's mostly a really lovely, warm, nostalgic feeling."

Finn admits that more than a few ghosts from the past remain here too.

"It can feel a little haunted at times – the memory pool is heightened in Melbourne, where we did a lot of things together. You see something and think, 'Oh, gosh, Paul was such a big part of that'... you miss him.

"But it's nice being back here with Mitchell, because he spent time here recording us. Everyone in Crowded House shares the history, and that's the great thing about this lineup. It's different to what it was, but it's got as much depth and as much soul to my mind as any lineup we've had. And potentially it might be our greatest lineup, by whatever measure you use. It feels like we've got massive trust now."

Liam Finn also has a complicated relationship with Melbourne. He lived in the city until he was nine, a time when he first realised his dad was famous thanks to a couple of overzealous Crowded House fans turning up at his primary school. He also spent some time here in his twenties with former band Betchadupa, a period that brings up mixed emotions.

"I love being here, it brings back so many hazy memories," he says. "I was actually living here when Paul died, which was quite intense. I got the call before my family did because they were all in England. So it was kind of a weird thing to be living back here and then everyone [in Crowded House] came back. I think it was then, at 20, when I realised the connection that Crowded House had, because it was such a heavy time."

A couple of decades on, he and Elroy were inducted into what is now essentially the family business – the pair even contributing songs to the new album. Liam offers an endearing anecdote about when his dad asked the pair of them to join his world-famous band.

"After he toured as a member of Fleetwood Mac, he knew he wanted to play with Nick again, so he brought it up that way," he says. "Dad was quite nervous too, because he was pretty unsure about what reaction we would have, because it could go like, 'Oh, I just want to do my own thing, Dad'. But there's no one in this world that cares about Crowded House as much as me and Elroy. It's part of our blood and the legacy is important to us, as well as the band moving forward. We both saw an opportunity to help protect that legacy."

AFTER BEING ACTIVE from 1985 to 1996 – an era capped by the Farewell to the World concert on the Sydney Opera House steps, which had one of the highest live audiences in Australian history with a crowd size estimated at between 120,000 and 250,000 people – Crowded House reformed between 2006 and 2011, releasing two new albums. The latest chapter for the band began in 2019, resulting in the current lineup and 2021 album *Dreamers Are Waiting*.

Long gone are the days when Neil, Nick and Paul lived in a literal crowded house in Los Angeles, thus inspiring the group's name (a replacement for original moniker 'The Mullanes', 'Mullane' being Finn's middle name and his mother's maiden name). Currently, band members are spread all over the globe: Neil in New Zealand, Nick in Ireland, Elroy in London and Liam and Mitchell in LA.

In a section of the Sofitel Melbourne on Collins that's exclusive enough to feature a secret meeting room hidden behind a mirror – and have Sarah Ferguson, Duchess of York seated at a nearby table – Elroy admits the tyranny of distance created a few complications while making *Gravity Stairs*.

"We are spread out about as far as you could be, but we had a good amount of practice with international record making over the Covid period [with *Dreamers Are Waiting*], so it's not something that's too foreign," he says. "There's been a lot of file sharing involved, but I think the results are unique and cool for that reason, too."

Despite much of the album being created via computers in different time zones, initial sessions for *Gravity Stairs* began almost by accident when the band were together in the Hinterlands of Byron Bay in 2022. While rehearsing for an upcoming tour, they decided to try out a few new songs and record them for fun.

STYLING CREDITS (PG 40—45) — LEAD STYLIST: JANA BARTOLO REPRESENTED BY SAM I AM, STYLING ASSISTANCE: GEM BROOKES, LIAM — JACKET: SONG FOR THE MUTE, PANTS: STOLEN GIRLFRIENDS CLUB, SHIRT: DOUBLE RAINBOUU, SHOES: DR MARTENS NICK — SHIRT: SAINT LAURENT AVAILABLE AT KOT-J, SKIRT: THOM BROWNE AVAILABLE AT KOT-J, SHOES: COS, EYEWEAR: GENTLE MONSTER X MAISON MARGIELA EYEWEAR MM113, JEWELLERY: STOLEN GIRLFRIENDS CLUB, NEIL — JUMPER: SONG FOR THE MUTE, PANTS: H&M, SHOES: RM WILLIAMS, SOCKS: UNIQLO, ELROY FINN — TOP : UNIQLO, COAT: UNDERCOVER X SUPREME AVAILABLE AT KOT-J, PANTS: UNDERCOVER X SUPREME AVAILABLE AT KOT-J, SHOES: RM WILLIAMS, MITCH — JACKET: MJ BALE, SHIRT: HAYDEN SHAPES, PANTS: COS, SHOES: ZARA

GIULIA GIANNINI MCGAURAN

THE SOONER
BETTER NOW
IFALL
AND
Together
alone
HOUSE
DO YOU
CLIMB INTO
TO THE
HEY
DON'T LOOK BACK
AHEAD
BUT YOU'LL NEVER SEE THE
END OF THE ROAD

ABE MORA

"The original tracks that we did in Byron Bay were lush and kind of milky sounding, and the majority of the record is from that first couple of weeks," says Liam. "We were supposed to be quarantining before a tour and we thought we'd rehearse three songs but wound up doing about nine. We were learning to play the songs and not expressly thinking that we were making a record, so there's a nice nonchalant looseness to them."

From there, Neil took the songs back to New Zealand to work on, a process that all the band members acknowledge is a laser-focused process for the Crowded House frontman that often borders on obsession.

"Dad is always going to be working on songs, pushing himself to the edge of madness, to be honest," says Liam. "He's the hardest working person I know in the world. And for better or for worse, it just won't stop."

Mitchell Froom compares Neil to famed American singer-songwriter Randy Newman, who Froom has produced albums for.

"They're both kind of relentless and driven, which is beautiful," says Froom. "A lot of people have a problem with artists as they get older – they just seem to be retreading the same stuff, but some people just keep that fire for music. And these days Neil's much tougher on himself, so he'll just keep rewriting so that all of a sudden, the song is now a whole different song. He'll just keep at it."

Nick Seymour has been privy to Neil Finn's creative process for longer than most and says that adhering to incredibly high standards has always been the way his friend of 40 years works.

"There's times when it can become a pressure cooker type experience, where you're not sure what is actually under the scrutiny of that desire," he says. "We all have a desire to get it right. But he is quite obsessive in how deep he will go to describe something that can only be described musically as opposed to verbally. And we do work very, very hard when we are together. But the overriding awareness is to not work too much, to not over-gild the lily, so to speak. It's a fine line."

**"Dad is always going to be working on songs, pushing himself to the edge of madness. He's the hardest working person I know in the world. And for better or for worse, it just won't stop."**

***LIAM FINN***

LATER IN THE AFTERNOON, Seymour has made his way to the famed Bakehouse Studios in Richmond, a sprawling and eccentric rehearsal, recording and filming space that's seen everyone from Tool to Olivia Newton-John walk through its fabled doors.

Upstairs in a darkened room with wooden floorboards and a selection of musical instruments scattered about – including a guitar case labelled "Finn" – Neil Finn, guitar in hand and facing away from me, sits on a dolly track. He is slowly wheeled backwards, finally rotating around so that our eyes meet – a comical, unintentionally dramatic moment akin to a villain welcoming a foe in their secret lair.

"I have one of these at home – it's how I greet all my guests," he quips.

Finn is filming a video for the band's next single "Life's Imitation" with renowned music video director Richard Lowenstein, who also helmed the clips for early Crowded House singles "Mean to Me" and "Into Temptation".

Throughout multiple takes, Finn mimes the song as it plays at double and triple speed.

His work ethic and commitment to paying attention to the small details so that everything meets his exacting standards is plain to see. In close quarters, his prime directive is evident: *How can I make this the absolute best it can be?*

Even though it seems too late to change, Finn even questions whether he has given the band's new single the correct title.

"We probably should have called it 'Teenage Summer' [a lyric in "Life's Imitation"]. I think we might have made a complete blunder actually, because that's the line that everybody will probably remember," he says ruefully.

"We've left it too late now. 'Life's Imitation' isn't quite as good a name really, but initially I thought that was the big hook. 'Teenage summer' was the throwaway at the end, but it's become a rallying cry of sorts."

In a nearby kitchen area, Seymour enthusiastically explains the art of book carving, showing some impressive examples on his phone that will be incorporated into both the music video and the artwork for *Gravity Stairs*. The graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts has designed all Crowded House's album covers and has been intrinsic to the band's distinct visual identity.



# HOUSE FAVOURITES

**The non-Neil Finn members of Crowded House pick their favourite songs from the band's catalogue**

## Nick Seymour

"The most successful song that we ever recorded as a group would be **'Into Temptation'**, in respect of us all being in the same place emotionally and physically and energetically. The tempo could not be any better to serve Neil's vocal musings and the arrangement is superb. It's an incredibly beautiful piece of music."

## Liam Finn

"It changes often, but let's say **'Nails In My Feet'**, because I love the guitar solo on it that I also get to play live."

## Elroy Finn

"I have a few, but I'd say **'Not The Girl You Think You Are'** – that's always been one of my favourites. It's very beautiful to me, just the way it's constructed and the sounds and the instruments."

## Mitchell Froom

"It used to be **'Into Temptation'**, but I don't know right now. On the new record, there's a song that I really like called **'Magic Piano'** and I think it's the best that the band has played in the studio. I think it's pretty great."

**"The band's current lineup has as much depth and soul as any lineup we've had. It might be our greatest lineup... it feels like we've got massive trust now."**

***NEIL FINN***

"I still really, really enjoy doing that and I kind of make assumptions that I'm going to be asked to do that," he laughs. "It's never challenged and then sometimes I think to myself, 'I hope I'm not bullying the other guys into me presenting an idea I have for the album cover' and then feeling like they must have me do it as opposed to going and asking some fine artist of note.

"I've always loved bands and artists that have some consistency in their visual output to the actual music that they make. I think that's important."

When reflecting on the legacy of what he and the rest of Crowded House have created, Seymour is quick to point out they've never been a 'career band' driven by a series of clearly defined goals.

"There's never been a plan, really," he says. "And there's never been a sense of the right or wrong decision to make career wise. I still feel like we're getting away with this somehow. I don't think we fit into any particular genre. By now, our music is defined by the name 'Crowded House', whereas years ago I used to get frustrated that people would know our songs but never associate it with the name. So I guess we've defined a brand over many, many years. But that is just the end result of endurance."

During a break in filming, Finn joins me in a red velvet-lined room that wouldn't look out of place in an episode of *Twin Peaks*.

The theme of connection comes up once more – it's essentially what "Life's Imitation" is all about – and I ask Finn if he knows when one of his songs is going to make that magical connection with a listener. It turns out one of the key indicators, quite sweetly, is the reaction of Sharon Finn, his wife of 42 years.

"I'll notice her dance in the doorway as I'm playing something, and I go, 'I got her, she gets it!', and that's a really good feeling," says Finn. "She loves music, and she's a great dancer as well, but she doesn't go for over-intellectualising music. It's more that she likes to feel it in her hips and get down to it and then sing it. She's a great sounding board."

In terms of connecting with those larger audiences who feel compelled to sing along to his songs – those magic combinations of words and music that sound completely effortless despite the painstaking work that goes into them – it's one of the key things that drives Finn in his eternal pursuit of the next perfect pop song.

"I guess because I've been in a band since I was 18, I always like the idea of playing for people," he says. "The possible effect it might have on a roomful of people, or two or three people or a whole stadium is part of the attraction, there's no doubt.

**Crowded House on stage at the Palais Theatre in Melbourne, March 6th, 2024.**

LEFT: PROVIDED BY GLOBAL CITIZEN AND GETTY

There's probably some ego attached to that. But there's also this sense of tapping into some universal feeling or consciousness – tapping into this thing that makes it feel more OK to be a human."

**"There's this sense of tapping into some universal feeling or consciousness – tapping into this thing that makes it feel more OK to be a human."**

***NEIL FINN***

A FEW WEEKS LATER, Neil Finn, minus the rest of the globally scattered members of Crowded House, is in Sydney to accept the Icon Award at the 2024 Rolling Stone Australia Awards.

"This is our new single, 'Teenage Summer'," he tells a room full of adoring fans and peers before playing a slightly reworked acoustic version of what was once known as "Life's Imitation". The single's new title is now set to be used for its digital release and anything beyond the first pressing of any physical copies of *Gravity Stairs*.

It may not be altogether obvious to those in attendance, but what they're bearing witness to is the key to becoming a genuine musical icon: a restless, relentless artistic heart and mind that's always in motion; always striving for that magical connection. ®

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JAMES JENNINGS *is Print Editor of* ROLLING STONE AU/NZ *and also writes about music for* THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD. *His byline has also appeared in* NME, KERRANG! and EMPIRE.

# *FINN ON FINN*

**Neil Finn picks the songs he's proudest of from each Crowded House album**

### "Don't Dream It's Over"
***Crowded House*, 1986**

"It's just travelled so amazingly and I still really like playing it and it's got something universal about it. It's a lovely mystery."

### "Into Temptation"
***Temple Of Low Men*, 1988**

"I think it's probably the best song on the record. There's also another song called 'Love This Life' that I've got a lot of affection for, for some reason. It's got a bit of a following in the fan club."

### "Fall At Your Feet" and "Four Seasons In One Day"
***Woodface*, 1991**

"Those two would be an equal measure of my favourites on that record."

### "Private Universe"
***Together Alone*, 1993**

"'Private Universe' is probably my favourite on that record. I'm fond of 'Fingers Of Love' too, that one's due for a comeback live. Those two are the dreamy, trippy side of the record."

### "People Are Like Suns"
***Time On Earth*, 2007**

"'People Are Like Suns' is my favourite on that album, but probably 'Pour le Monde' too. Both are piano songs."

### "Elephants"
***Intriguer*, 2010**

"This is a song about being the last one at a bar."

### "Show Me The Way"
***Dreamers Are Waiting*, 2021**

"We ended up playing that one a lot on stage. It just has a real kind of unusual atmosphere about it that I really like."

### "Magic Piano"
***Gravity Stairs*, 2024**

"'Magic Piano' is up there for me because it's one of the first ones we recorded and it has quite an elaborate chord scheme, which is kind of unusual for us. Besides some vocals I redid and a few little touches, everything you hear is live on the floor with no overdubs. So it was pretty exciting to get something that was that sophisticated."

# SPIRIT IN THE DARK

BY SIMONE AMELIA JORDAN

# AUSTRALIA'S WOMEN OF SOUL RIDE THE MUSIC INDUSTRY'S HIGHS AND LOWS BY EMBRACING THE ROLLERCOASTER

KAREN LEE ANDREWS bid farewell to her beloved grandfather at 11. Inside a sterile ward at St. Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, she and her relatives stood vigil, chanting time-honoured hymns as he faced his final days. Their harmonies were so soothing that nurses asked her uncle, a classically-trained opera singer, if the tight knit Tongan family could serenade other hospice patients.

"He turned to only me and said, 'Karen, let's go'. We went around, and I sang to people as they passed over," the musician recalls, now in her forties. "I knew then there was something different about me."

Andrews' parents enrolled her in the Wollongong Conservatorium of Music, but instructors, including private tutors, struggled with her low vocal register. Additionally, her strict, born-again Christian upbringing hindered any professional ambitions. In her early twenties, Andrews found a home for her booming voice in soul music, inspired by fellow church-honed contraltos Etta James and Nina Simone. "It felt natural," she reflects.

Soul music, arising in the late 1950s within African American communities, marked a vibrant secularisation of gospel intertwined with rhythm and blues. A stirring soundscape for the Civil Rights movement, it underscored Black people's arduous struggle for equal rights under United States law. Since its halcyon days in the Sixties, the genre has birthed several sub-categories like Motown, Latin soul, quiet storm and neo-soul.

One distinct variety, blue-eyed soul, includes among its most adored proponents Renee Geyer, the late powerhouse who described herself as "a white Hungarian Jew from Australia sounding like a 65-year-old Black man from Alabama". Geyer's birthplace, Melbourne, is regarded as soul music's Down Under headquarters, giving rise to Vika and Linda, Kylie Auldist, Ella Thompson, Thando, WILSN, Mo'ju and more. It's where Gumbaynggirr and Yamatji woman Emma Donovan teamed up with The Putbacks, an outfit influenced by acclaimed Memphis-based label Stax Records.

"As a performer, the Aboriginal community is my safe space, but being in Melbourne and working with The Putbacks was very cool," says Donovan, who grew up singing country and folk with her cherished family band, The Donovans. During The Putbacks' 2012 Woodford Folk Festival performance, Donovan connected offstage with Saundra Williams and Starr Duncan Lowe, renowned as The Dapettes, backup vocalists for headliner Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings. Their conversations touched on soul music's international mark and its interpretation within Indigenous cultures.

Emma Donovan

"It's amazing how far the music has travelled," Donovan says. "When I think of songs I've written and been a part of, I think about how much we relate soul music to being on country. It's all soulful, from our Dreaming storytelling to how we connect."

Andrews, a Polynesian woman, "regularly addresses" how she represents the Black art form. "Gospel music, blues, soul and jazz were born out of oppression, and I will always be respectful, mindful and aware of that," she says. "Whenever I sing an Aretha [Franklin] or Nina [Simone] song, even my songs, I understand it's not from me and my standalone talent. I've been taught by people who experienced such hardship that something meaningful has come out of them and impacted the world so that you just want to grab and hold onto it."

The finest soul artists pour their hearts out on stage, and Andrews is no exception. Despite her demanding tour schedule's emotional toll ("Needing to be switched on, and sometimes on demand, doesn't always work out how you want it to"), she considers it an essential aspect of her calling.

"My audience works, and they have families and priorities. I respect, value and appreciate that they spend their money to come and see me," she says. "It's important that when they walk out, they don't feel they were 'sang on'; there is a real interaction, a real exchange."

With an unshakable spotlight on stars like Beyoncé, Taylor Swift and Adele, the music industry can present a façade of gender progressiveness. Closer examination reveals persistent disparities in crucial roles such as songwriting, sound engineering and producing. Women from marginalised backgrounds – those of colour, LGBTQI+ women, and individuals with disabilities – face even steeper obstacles. This reality is evident in Australia, where our rich tapestry of musical heritage remains overshadowed.

According to radio host, singer and co-founder of Sydney-based collective Sisters With Soul, Tanya Rahme, supply and demand hinders local soul music's ascent compared to, say, Los Angeles or Berlin. "Apart from access to live venues being almost impossible to book, the lack of sponsorship and forward drive given to our artists, in a moment in time where pop and hip-hop and TikTok 25-second song trends saturate fans, is where I see the most significant disconnect," she says.

"Only now have I, an Aboriginal woman in my forties, working for decades, been offered the opportunity to record my first solo album," says Donovan. She notes the unrest surrounding last year's divisive Australian Indigenous Voice Referendum made it especially tough for Blak entertainers. She compares their creative resilience to the sanctity of parenthood. "As a mum, you never stop. You continue to put food on your table and clothes on your kids' backs.

KAREN LEE ANDREWS - ANDRE&DOMINIQUE, EMMA DONOVAN - SUPPLIED

**“I think about those who came before us, fighting to keep our say alive.”**
**EMMA DONOVAN**

You’ve got to be determined, and that’s what I am; that’s what our mob are in the arts scene. We get up and come back stronger.”

The Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) charts for 2023 marked a historical low point for Australian music, with no domestic entries featured among the Top 100 singles or albums released that year. Addressing this issue requires a concerted effort to support Australian musicians, including helping them navigate the eligibility requirements for chart inclusion and facilitating listener relationships.

“We have incredibly talented, world-class soul performers who still face significant discoverability issues in new Australian music,” says ARIA CEO Annabelle Herd, who works closely with bodies like Music Australia and Sound NSW to establish the proper infrastructure and “give these incredible women the best chance of crossing over with mainstream audiences to achieve sustainable commercial success.”

Rahme suggests aspiring artists must “network, socialise and create an online presence. Surround yourself with like-minded, positive women, and find opportunities to perform together at events or open mics, both great ways to gain experience and exposure.” Andrews is pragmatic, reasoning that female soul acts should be realistic about existing on the industry’s fringes and embrace it. “Understand where you sit in the space and work from there,” she says. “Hope is in comprehending the realities of it.”

“I think about those who came before us, fighting to keep our say alive,” Donovan says. “I call it the ‘Blakfulla Blues’, music from women like Aunty Ruby Hunter and Tiddas. This new generation, like Emily Wurramara and Thelma Plum, makes a lot of noise and is free to say what we need. As an older Aboriginal woman, I’m so proud of that.”

Herd says, “The last 12 months have seen Australian soul and R&B step into the spotlight,” with ARIA finding ways to better advocate, educate, and showcase the artists making waves here and overseas. Soul has long been a fixture in our premier festivals, including Byron Bay Bluesfest, Splendour In The Grass and Falls Festival. There’s been a noticeable shift towards catering to a younger demographic, typified by the emergence of circuit newcomers like Souled Out Festival (their 2024 lineup featured Summer Walker, Libianca and local act Lara Andallo). “The reaction to this year’s announcement was one of the biggest we’ve seen,” says co-founder Emal Naim. “Witnessing it near sell out shows that both modern and throwback R&B is alive.”

Soul music’s essence is a balm as we grapple with the aftermath of a devastating pandemic and pervasive issues such as global conflicts and rising living costs. “Soul music hits a different corner of the heart,” says Andrews. “People who come to my shows need that moment to be fed. I like to have the lights on a little to see them. The receiving and giving is everything.” ®

SIMONE AMELIA JORDAN, *author, journalist, and founder of The Dream Collective, mentors diverse women in media and entertainment. Her debut memoir,* TELL HER SHE'S DREAMIN', *won the Richell Prize.*

Tanya Rahme

Karen Lee Andrews

TANYA RAHME: SUPPLIED, KAREN LEE ANDREWS: ANDRE&DOMINIQUE

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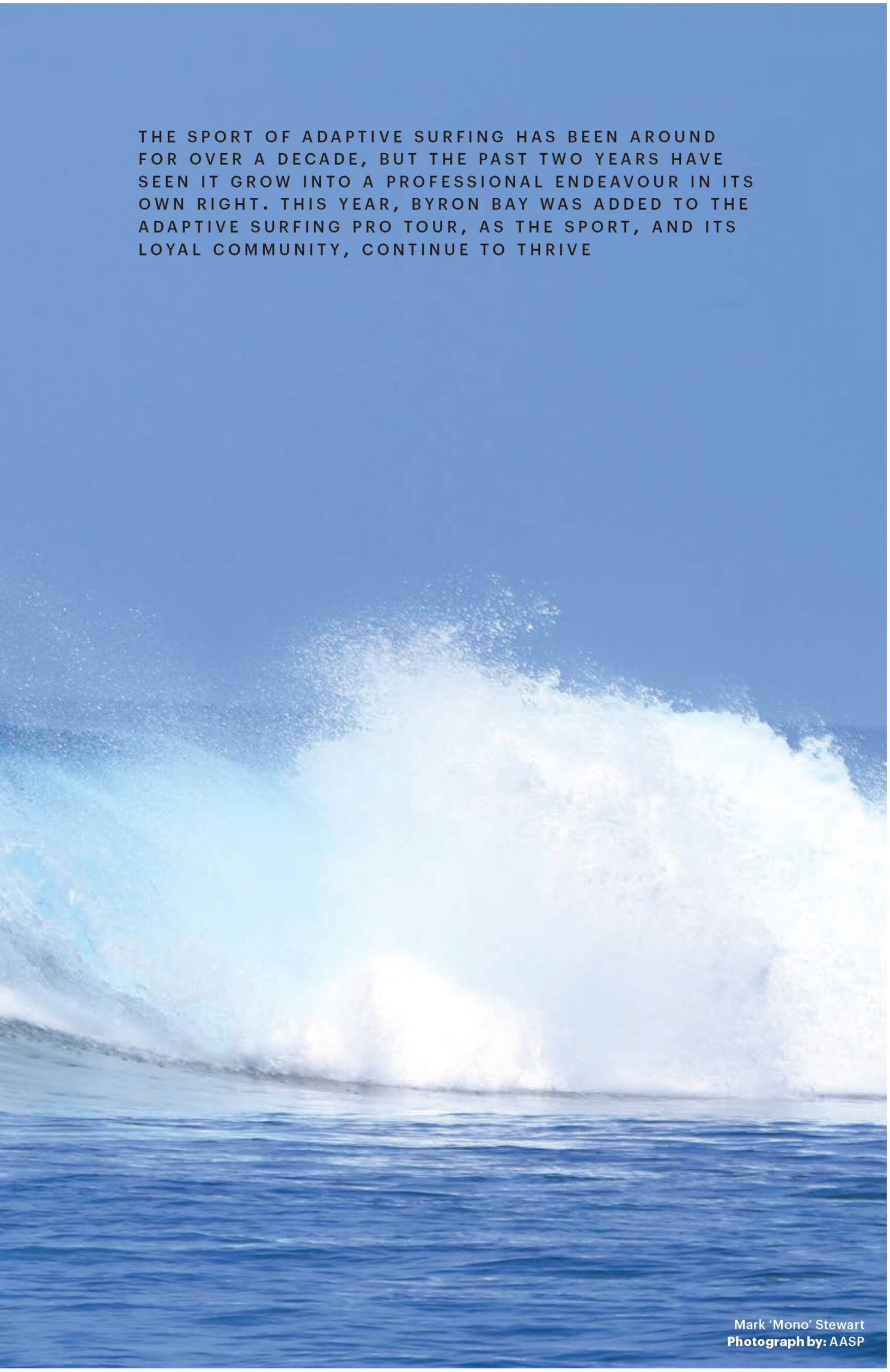
# INSIDE THE GREENROOM

BY SAMUEL J. FELL

THE SPORT OF ADAPTIVE SURFING HAS BEEN AROUND FOR OVER A DECADE, BUT THE PAST TWO YEARS HAVE SEEN IT GROW INTO A PROFESSIONAL ENDEAVOUR IN ITS OWN RIGHT. THIS YEAR, BYRON BAY WAS ADDED TO THE ADAPTIVE SURFING PRO TOUR, AS THE SPORT, AND ITS LOYAL COMMUNITY, CONTINUE TO THRIVE



Mark 'Mono' Stewart
**Photograph by:** AASP

AT THE BYRON BAY SERVICES CLUB on a balmy Friday evening in late March, the mood in the backroom is festive. People are thronging about, toing and froing from the bistro counter and the bar – both of which are doing a brisk trade – back to tables lined with smiling faces, others milling about amongst it all, greeting one another, laughing, slapping backs.

On the screen attached to the wall behind the small stage – where a band is setting up to play later on, once the official part of the evening has concluded – there are replays running of surfers mid-competition, riding the waves off Byron's Clarkes Beach (only a few hundred metres away from the Club itself) from earlier in the day.

It's a scene, and very much a Byron scene: a warm evening, beer, surfing, laughter, but for one significant difference – at least half the loosely assembled crowd are in wheelchairs or on crutches, displaying, beneath the swinging hems of boardshorts, prosthetic limbs. Collectively, they hail from 16 different countries, and it is in fact them up on that screen, navigating Byron's world-famous surf break.

For this, here in the backroom of the Services Club down the south end of Johnson Street in one of the most famous beach towns in Australia, is the end-of-comp awards ceremony for 2024's first event on the Association of Adaptive Surfing Professionals (AASP) pro tour, the first time an AASP event has been held outside of the Americas.

These people are the cream of the adaptive surfing crop, and they've just completed what many of us can only dream of doing; it's little wonder that the mood is festive.

Mark 'Mono' Stewart
**Photograph by:** AASP

"BEING IN THE ocean makes you feel normal." Mark 'Mono' Stewart sits on the balcony of the Byron Bay Surf Club, looking out across the water which, a week prior to the Byron event, is calm and of a shade of blue one can hardly describe. Small, perfectly formed waves rise and break almost silently in front of us.

"When I first lost my leg," Stewart shrugs, "the first thing I did was get back into the ocean." Born and raised in the Byron Shire, firstly on a dairy farm over in Mullumbimby and then up in the hills around Nimbin, Stewart lost his right leg as a 15-year-old due to a rare form of bone cancer called osteosarcoma. Back then, in the mid-Seventies, the likes of chemotherapy were in their infancy and so it was a hard slog for the young Stewart, his leg eventually being amputated above the knee. He'd been a keen sportsman up until this point, and for many people, the loss of a limb at such an age would have been devastating, almost impossible to comprehend.

And yet Stewart is made of sterner stuff I come to realise over the next week or so, stuff that is common for adaptive athletes.

Mark Stewart is a four-time world champion in the Kneel division, one of nine divisions that make up professional adaptive surfing (or para-surfing, as it's also known). He is also the organiser of the Byron pro tour event which brings, under the auspices of the AASP, the official tour total to four events, adding to the long-running Hawaii Adaptive Surf Championships, the Costa Rica Open Pro of Adaptive Surfing, and finally, the US Open Adaptive Surfing Championships in Oceanside, California.

The foundation of the AASP in 2022, as the official governing body of professional adaptive surfing, has pulled together under one umbrella the burgeoning sport as a whole. It is, today, an independent, professional sport in its own right – the pro tour, the prize money and event parameters, the world rankings: all are recognised and adhered to under the watchful and supportive eye of the AASP, which runs out of California.

And the importance of such a governing body cannot be underestimated, as Stewart knows only too well. "The AASP was formulated to give our sport a professional platform," he explains. "They have a major sponsor, so that money gets divided up between the events; they give us money towards our event and [with] our entry money, all that money has to be utilised towards the prize money. It's to give back to the athletes, which is the whole concept of the AASP."

This professionalisation of the sport over the past two years has indeed been incredibly beneficial to the athletes concerned. And yet, as Stewart knows even better, it's the sport itself which takes centre stage. "Over the years, as I've spoken to other athletes, they're exactly the same," he muses. "On land, we're visually disabled, and you know, you get used to people staring at you and all that, but when you're in the water, people don't give you a second look.

"It's being in the ocean that's the best healing thing we can have. And it seems to mentally take away a lot of that stress; you're not worried about people looking at you, you're not worried about people whispering behind your back. So that's what's so good for an adaptive athlete, about the ocean – it normalises you mentally. It's a great leveller."

AT 56 YEARS of age, Charles 'Chaka' Webb is viewed by many in the sport of adaptive surfing as its godfather. He laughs when I put this to him, citing others like Rich Julian who co-founded the oldest event on the AASP pro tour, the Hawaiian event, as being there before him, but it's been Webb who has been instrumental in bringing adaptive surfing into its own via his founding of the AASP in 2022.

Recognised internationally as the governing body of professional adaptive surfing (as opposed to the International Surfing Association, which governs amateur adaptive surfing), the AASP strives to "create and sustain an international professional adaptive surfing tour and elevate the sport of adaptive

"THE ROOTS OF PROFESSIONAL SURFING ARE HAWAII, AUSTRALIA AND CALIFORNIA. SO HOW CAN IT NOT GROW ADAPTIVE SURFING? IF WE HAVE THOSE ROOTS IN THERE, AND THAT CULTURE AND THOSE SURF BREAKS."

CHARLES 'CHAKA' WEBB

Charles 'Chaka' Webb
**Photograph by:** Tommy Pierucki

Mark 'Mono' Stewart
**Photograph by:** AASP

surfing to an elite professional level. It will be the responsibility of the AASP to be the international governing body of professional adaptive surfing and its world rankings," according to its website.

"It's just to create a professional platform for these guys, to have, you know, a goal," Webb tells me amidst the bustle of the backroom of the Services Club, having finished fourth in his division over the course of the week. "And the goal [might have been], you know, 'I wanna be the Hawaii Adaptive Surf Champion', or 'I wanna be the US Open Champion...' Well, everybody has been talking about this for so long, so how do we get to be a *world* championship? How do we build that? And basically, it just took money – somebody to believe in it and say, 'Here's the money to do it, so go do it'." That somebody was Visit Oceanside – who are, essentially, the tourism bureau for Oceanside, California – who invested $225,000 over three years towards the AASP from 2022, and who have recently signed on for three more years, "taking us through to 2027," confirms Webb.

"The roots of professional surfing are really Hawaii, Australia and California," he says. "So if we can have those spots right there on the tour, that's the roots of where able-bodied surfing started. So how can it not grow adaptive surfing, if we have those roots in there, and that culture and those environments and those surf breaks? It's gotta grow. And look, it's growing."

When the Hawaiian event first ran in 2014, it attracted some 50 athletes; in 2023 (as part of the AASP pro tour), 105 athletes attended. The Byron event, in its first year, played host to 92 athletes, not all of them members of the tour, but a huge turnout for a maiden competition.

"Last year we had 86 members, this year we have 70, and by the end event we'll get more and be in that 80 rank," Webb explains. "Our goal is to have 100 members every year... but we want more women to come into the environment, we're gonna have more Australians come into the environment next year, and there were already a ton of them, man!"

I ask him what the barometer is for success in terms of the Byron Bay event, and in response his face lights up and he sweeps an arm around the room. "I wanted 70 to 100 athletes, and if you have that, that's the barometer for me. OK, if we get 70, then that's on the low end of 'that's a good, successful event'. The first time this event opens up, we get 92? That's a huge success."

"I GOT ADDICTED TO THAT SENSE OF FREEDOM. ON LAND, I CAN ONLY GO WHERE MY WHEELCHAIR TAKES ME, BUT IN THE OCEAN I CAN DO THE SAME AS EVERYONE ELSE."

JOCELYN NEUMUELLER

Jocelyn Neumueller
**Photograph by:** Lost In Paradise

JOCELYN NEUMUELLER IS the current AASP Women's Champion and World Number One in the Prone Assist division, having won all three pro tour events in both years since the AASP came to be. Hailing from South Australia, the 28-year-old, around 12 years ago, was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease which left her paralysed from the waist down, again, an outcome which would have stunned most other sport-obsessed young women.

Not one to let anything get in her way however, she took up para-canoeing, a sport in which she immediately excelled: she finished fifth at the Rio Paralympics in 2016; she's also an accomplished para-sailor; has been a member of the Australian women's wheelchair basketball team, and is about to be admitted to the South Australian supreme court as a solicitor, having just completed her law degree.

A year after winning the para-canoeing World Championships in 2017 however, a freak training accident in which she tore her brachial plexus saw her lose the use of her left arm. No longer able to canoe, she turned her attention to table tennis (in which she won her category, as well as the one above, at the Oceania Championships) and swimming, but it was as part of her rehabilitation in the ocean, that she fell in love with surfing.

"I guess there wasn't much satisfaction in hitting a ball across a table," she smiles of her table tennis sojourn, sitting in a café on Byron's Main Beach as rain falls outside, postponing the start of the day's heats until later on. "So I went to swimming, but swimming up and down a blue line was also not very challenging... but two of my support workers ended up picking up a soft board and taking me out on a pretty shitty small break down the coast from Adelaide, and I just kinda got hooked.

"That freedom and that sense of independence I got by being on the wave, was something I don't experience anywhere else," she goes on, smiling, "so I don't think I ever went back to my swim training, which I was supposed to be doing five times a week; I got addicted to that sense of freedom. On land, I can only go where my wheelchair takes me, but in the ocean I can do the same as everyone else.

"And this sounds bad, but I love being wiped out – sometimes on land living with a disability, you're placed in this cotton wool ball and protected from everything, whereas you get wiped out the same way as *anyone* gets wiped out, it's just refreshing."

In her heat, two days prior, Neumueller scored a 9.5 and a 9.18, propelling her straight into Friday's final. "We've got a split final because we've only got four in our division... it'll be good to get out there and improve on my scores." Wanting to improve on those scores, which are out of 10, highlights further how

RIGHT: BRYON SHIRE COUNCIL

**"THEY'RE NOT NORMAL SURFING EVENTS. AFTER BEING THERE FOR A DAY AND LISTENING AND TALKING TO PEOPLE, YOU WALK AWAY FROM THAT A BETTER PERSON."**

**MARK 'MONO' STEWART**

driven she is, and also her love of sport in general, which she sees as vitally important to her, and other adaptive athletes', lives.

"For me, sport plays a really powerful role in giving people that sense of purpose, that sense of belonging and that's something to pursue," she says. "There are a lot of barriers out there to people with a disability to enter the workforce, to find their place in society, so sport in general helps bridge that gap for people finding their sense of purpose, just like anyone else. It's where people can connect with others, and learn with others... and find that sense of community."

I SPEND MOST OF Tuesday wandering around the event's precinct on the foreshore, just along from the Surf Club where there's a big screen showing the heats live, with on-beach commentary, and down on the beach itself, where the action is. I see Webb finish second in the Sit Down Wave Ski division semi-final, advancing to the final, where he'll finish fourth. I see countless other athletes riding waves, sitting under canopies on the beach awaiting their heats, riding the Surf Club buggy to and from the launch site.

The feeling I get, the overwhelming feeling, is one of complete and utter comradery, to the point, as I remark to Neumueller a couple of days later, that it all seems, despite the professionalism, like one big family reunion. "I think that's something that's common [to] every single person you see who is involved with this sport; everyone is helping and supporting one another," she acknowledges with a smile.

"There's no, 'I'm gonna keep this to myself'. As a community, there's this push to get better as a whole, and support each other. Every single person here has their own journey and are willing to share that journey, especially with younger athletes coming up through the sport." "What you'll notice here," beams Webb at the awards ceremony, echoing Neumueller, "is that even though everyone was just out there battling each other, the comradery is, you know... you can feel it when you come into the room."

"They're not normal surfing events," Mark Stewart had said the week prior. "It's hard to describe the feeling you get at these events. It's a totally different thing, like, after being there for a day and listening and talking to people, you walk away from that a better person."

The Byron event was originally planned for 2020, but of course Covid scuttled that. Stewart then, has been working feverishly to get the event off the ground ever since and its immediate success is testament to his hard work and belief in the sport. "I've always been passionate about it," he concurs. "I've always wanted to bring adaptive athletes to our country so that our country can see what these events do." What they do is showcase the skill and talent of said athletes, who in truth can do a lot more than most able-bodied people. Adaptive surfing is, at the time of writing, on a shortlist of two for inclusion in the 2028 Los Angeles Paralympics, which would help immensely in terms of international recognition of a sport that embodies inclusion, community and the overcoming of incredible odds.

I leave the Services Club more than aware (or, at least, more aware than I had been) of how insurmountable these odds can be – the athletes, the committed volunteers, water safety crew, friends and family; adaptive surfing isn't just something that happens on the fringes of able-bodied surfing – this is real and alive and its people feel it.

And Neumueller? As I stand at the bar that night, I bump into her twin sister who, beaming, tells me Jocelyn scored a perfect 10 in her final, indeed improving on her already phenomenal scores from early in the week. "I got the highest heat total of the entire event in the final," she texts me the next day. That, in itself, is reason enough for anyone's mood to be festive. ®

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# THREE IS THE MAGIC NUMBER

BY SOSEFINA FUAMOLI

# How Nooky, Dallas Woods and Angus Field found power and healing together as First Nations supergroup 3%, creating one of the best albums of the year along the way

"This was spur of the moment Blak magic," Nooky says, a smile spreading across his face, pondering the release of his next body of work – this time with 3%, the "First Nations supergroup" featuring the Yuin, Thungutti MC, Noongar rapper and MC Dallas Woods, and Gumbaynggirr singer-songwriter, Angus Field.

Titled *Kill The Dead*, the debut studio album from 3% is a record built on a foundation of potent storytelling. Bringing ancestral energy together with a mutual admiration for the artistry of one another as individual musicians, 3% united in 2022 to create art that would leave an impact on the music industry, but more importantly, add to the empowered legacy of Blak music in this country.

With *Kill The Dead*, the trio have made a record diverse in sound, showcasing not just their undeniable chemistry, but the voices of some incredible artists, both known and new to the ears of Australian music fans. Across its 14 tracks, *Kill The Dead* journeys themes of reclamation, redemption and resilience; a powerful album that has brought out different sides of each artist as a result.

"Dallas was on a lot of uplifting, positive stuff before," Nooky explains. "This gave him a licence to do some heavier stuff with me. In turn, it allowed me to show a side of myself that I've never shown before. Everyone is used to the brazen, in your face, fiery Nooky.

"Working with Dallas and Angus allowed me to tap into a side of myself I'd reserved for myself for a long time. There was something in that moment, where we realised we were meant to do this together."

## A GIFT FROM THE ANCESTORS

THE ORIGIN STORY of 3% begins on January 26, 2022 – the day Nooky launched his Indigenous social enterprise initiative, We Are Warriors. At the same time as Nooky was presenting this platform, dedicated to celebrating the potential of Blak excellence to the public for the first time, new music was being created with Woods.

The creation of one song between the two led Nooky to travel to Woods' studio in Castlemaine in Victoria, where inspiration for something new hit. Over the course of one day of session work, the duo found themselves with enough material for an EP on their hands.

**"I FEEL LIKE IT WAS GIFTED TO US FROM THE OLD PEOPLE. I CAN'T SIT HERE AND TELL YOU THAT WE HAD A PLAN. IT JUST HAPPENED."**

**NOOKY**

"I feel like it was gifted to us from the old people," Nooky says. "I can't sit here and tell you that we had a plan. It just happened."

The process then brought Woods to Nooky's home turf in Sydney, where the final touches on the material was scheduled to take place. True to Nooky form, the rapper was working on a number of different projects simultaneously; one of them being with Field, a relatively new voice to the scene, but one that Nooky saw the potential in from the jump.

As both Nooky and Field remember, the connection the trio had upon their first meeting was immediate. With Woods and Field meeting for the first time during shared studio time in Sydney, 3% was formed unintentionally; each talent complementing one another in ways that even they were surprised by.

"I didn't know Dallas until I walked into the studio," Field explains. "After that one day, it was like I'd known him my whole life. Nooks I'd known from before as he was helping me out with some stuff, but the way we got on with each other at the start translated into the music. The music became something that was so enjoyable for all of us and it just continued to create energy that kept going up and up."

"The three of us, it felt right. It became pretty evident in the moment that it was a thing," Nooky adds. "What we created, it tapped into sides of us that haven't been shown before, necessarily. From that session, the four or five ideas we had turned into 15. It all came together in one or two sessions, it was done."

## FOR US, BY US

THE FIRST OFFICIAL release from 3% arrived in the form of "Our People", the driving, visceral debut single that sampled The Presets' 2007 hit "My People", reframing the context of the original to reflect the history of displacement and struggle experienced by First Nations peoples.

The release of "Our People" wasn't just a perfect introduction to 3% as a group, but it was a reminder of how exciting Blak music in Australia currently is. It's an excitement felt throughout the *Kill The Dead* album. Highlighting the talents of specifically selected artists – both known and fresh to audiences – the group brings a beautiful group of voices and storytellers to the fore.

"This is a body of work that features all Blak artists from almost every corner of the map," Nooky explains. "We've got Torres Strait mob on here; we've got Tasmania mob on here; we've got Western Australia, we've got New South Wales, we've got Queensland mob. That was intentional. The people we picked, we picked them so we could be hitting different corners of the map. We tried

SAVITRI WENDT

to do it in a way where we're highlighting young and exciting talent who people may not be expecting."

Whether it's in the beautiful harmonies and melodic work of Tia Gostelow ("Sleezy Steezy") and Jessica Mauboy ("Won't Stop"); the dominating presence of Say True God? and DENNI ("Land Back"), or the yearning notes delivered by Marlon Motlop – or, as Nooky describes, "the Blak Ed Sheeran" – on album opener, "Black Australia Policy", *Kill The Dead* is a celebration of diversity in sound as much as it is a powerful statement of pride.

"I strongly believe that this is just good music. There is so much in here that hits close to the heart, it's so raw," Field says. "I feel like this could be a moment of time that will really stand strong within the Australian music industry, and for Blakfellas. For me, "Our People" was a huge moment in my eyes; I was so proud of what we did with that, how we held ourselves and how we wrote it. That was a moment in time where Blakfellas were heard for a bit, you know? It was like, 'That's our song. That's done for us, by us'. The album has so much rawness from us, but it's not just from us, it's from everyone else in our community."

**"THERE IS SO MUCH IN HERE THAT HITS CLOSE TO THE HEART, IT'S SO RAW. THIS COULD BE A MOMENT OF TIME THAT WILL STAND STRONG WITHIN THE AUSTRALIAN MUSIC INDUSTRY, AND FOR BLAKFELLAS."**

**ANGUS FIELD**

### "WE SET THE BAR SO HIGH FOR OURSELVES, WE CAN'T GO BACKWARDS..."

AS 2023 WAS wrapping up, 3% took the energy harnessed in the studio to the stage for the first time. Making their live debut at SXSW Sydney, on a lineup that featured Blak excellence right throughout, 3% had the crowd in attendance – and soon after, those who couldn't be in the room – buzzing.

This night in particular also drew the attention of visiting international keynote speaker and fellow artist, Chance the Rapper, who showed his support for the group and the First Nations event showcasing artists that evening; videos from the night rapidly circulated on social media in the days following.

For 3%, having the co-sign of someone like Chance the Rapper was one thing, sure. But the empowerment and validation they felt in presenting their music for the first time reinforced that they were onto something great – something that was bigger than themselves.

"Chance the Rapper may have been the highlight for the blogs, but he wasn't the highlight for what the actual people were there for, you know?" Woods says.

"You had BARKAA standing up in her matriarchal energy, you had Inkabee, the next generation... there was so much, and that's what 3% stands for. That's us as a whole. To get up there and be introduced the way we did it, we set the bar so high for ourselves, we can't go backwards. That's hard to do. We went out there and introduced ourselves the only way we knew: chest out, spear in hand. Not pulling no punches. We were there in spirit, in flesh, and everyone that came along with us; every time we hit that stage, they were there too."

"I'm obviously the greenest at this, you'd say. Nooks and Dally have been at a professional level for a long time," Field adds.

For the singer-songwriter, who has been performing in other bands for over a decade, 3% has been an avenue for him to flourish under a new spotlight; one that has set him on a new personal, and creative path.

"At a time when the last band I was in split up, I was at a dead end too. I was dead in the water," he says.

"Nooks and Dally were looking for something more in music, and that was how it all formed. It was the same with the live aspect. I'd never been on stage with performers like Dallas and Nooky. To be with people who are so professional and so sure of what they're doing on stage, it's almost like... you're hoping some of that will rub off on you. That's what I feel like with the boys. I know that I'm learning so much about my live performance, just by being on stage with them. I've always got that hand on my back with them, always encouraging me and helping me along the way."

LEFT: NIKHAL NINNAN, RIGHT: SAVITRI WENDT

Dallas Woods, Nooky and Angus Field

**“WE WENT OUT THERE AND INTRODUCED OURSELVES THE ONLY WAY WE KNEW: CHEST OUT, SPEAR IN HAND. NOT PULLING NO PUNCHES.”**

**DALLAS WOODS**

### A NEW BROTHERHOOD

AS A LIVE UNIT, 3% have continued to develop their show, performing at a number of different events on the East Coast in recent months, most recently as part of Treaty Day Out for 2024 on Wadawurrung Country in Ballarat.

With the completion of *Kill The Dead* and the anticipation for the music spreading, building momentum since those early single drops and performances over spring and summer, 3% has their focus directly set on their next strides forward.

This album isn’t created to be a one-off moment in time; more material has already been created for future projects. Ideas continue to swirl as 3% explore their connection to music and connection to one another as artists.

Each of the members confidently says that throughout this process, they’ve discovered a brotherhood they weren’t expecting. And in that, the music has become more defined; the vision clearer than ever.

“The word ‘family’ gets thrown around a lot in music, but it’s a business. I feel like that word loses its weight,” Nooky says. “With these boys though, without a shadow of doubt, I can say they are family outside of this. We’ve only been together a few months, but we’ve been put in scenarios where other people would act differently. I’ve seen the way that these fullas have held themselves, conducted themselves – I can call them family and mean it. Working on this with them, it has that family unit vibe. We’re there for each other and it’s not just saying it because it looks good. We really mean it.”

“You learn how to complement each other without taking away from each other. That’s something that is so hard to do,” Woods adds. “You have to be a unit. You have to have your own individual space without taking away from anyone else. It’s about letting go of the ego and having trust. That’s the main thing. I’ve always had to be the main person, so to have trust in the brothers next to me, it falls back into my personal life too. Having trust in the people around me, in the music game, knowing they’ve got my best interests at heart. We’re all trying to make it to the same spot.”

### A CONTEMPORARY TAKE ON ANCIENT TRADITION

SO MUCH OF what 3% represents is in the unification of First Nations people, as well as allies, through storytelling and music that, yes, shakes up the norm, but also soothes and entertains.

Not only is the music engaging, but it carries the spirit of ancestral storytelling, in that this is a new generation’s way of passing knowledge and history down through the oral tradition, namely song.

Perhaps it is partly why each member of 3% feel so attached to the craft; this way of expression and presentation is in their DNA.

As Field describes, the music stems from emotion that comes from deep within the musician, leading to their tight bond as a unit.

“We give a lot of our soul to the music, what we’re singing about, what we’re writing about,” he says. “We all believe in the same idea behind what we’re writing about so strongly. That’s why we’ve bonded so well too; the passion as artists, as individual artists, together we have that extreme drive and determination to tell our story and make music a lot of people will listen to.”

Adds Woods, “This is us leaving a footprint for the next generation to follow, but not just one big footprint, one *of* the big footprints that are being left for other artists as well. That we are part of such a powerful and amazing generation who fought like the generation before us and the new generation can look back and see us as people who flew the flag proudly and strongly.”

### REDEMPTION SONG

IN THE MUSIC of 3%, Australian music audiences are given fresh insight into a new wave of storytelling from some of our country’s most important and impassioned voices.

In the case of Field, it’s a perfect introduction to a vocalist with a beautiful hold on melody, songwriting and delivery. When it comes to Woods, *Kill The Dead* has been an opportunity to showcase his versatility as an artist and performer; the facets of his emotional range as an artist shining bright.

And for Nooky, the lynchpin of the project, 3% has been more than a new vehicle for music and change. Striking a personal chord within himself, the creation of this project

**“WORKING ON THIS [ALBUM], IT HAS THAT FAMILY UNIT VIBE. WE’RE THERE FOR EACH OTHER AND IT’S NOT JUST SAYING IT BECAUSE IT LOOKS GOOD. WE REALLY MEAN IT.”**

**NOOKY**

with his collaborators has led him back to loving music again; something he thought was long gone.

“When I came into this game in the beginning, music was healing to me,” he explains. “Somewhere along the way, the industry, the business side of things and the politics of it all, it tainted it. The healing became poison. Part of that was me as well, it wasn’t all the industry; it was myself getting lost in the sauce. I stopped honouring music, stopped respecting music. It got to a point where I was doing other things and I was getting into my stride outside of music doing other business ventures. I was ready to call it. There wasn’t any love or joy in music anymore.”

A necessary shock to the system, 3% has lit a fuse of inspiration and rejuvenation for Nooky that you can hear behind each impassioned bar he delivers on *Kill The Dead*. You can hear it in his moments of vulnerability and moments of pure fun he has with each lyrical flex on the album.

“Working with Dallas and Angus, it brought back the fun. It brought back the love,” he says. “It’s music that I’m proud of. For me, that’s a big thing, because I was looking back at some of the stuff I’ve done and there’s some stuff there I’m really not proud of. When I’m dead and gone, it’s like, is *that* what my legacy will be? That’s fucked. *Kill The Dead* is a bit of a redemptive moment for myself.

“I’m putting everything – my blood, sweat and tears – into this. I can say that when I am gone, I’m proud this exists because this is the real me. This is it. This journey I’ve been on with these two, it’s done a lot for me personally. It’s made me love music again, it’s taken it back to healing.” ®

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SOSEFINA FUAMOLI *is a Melbourne-based writer and broadcaster, contributing to* ROLLING STONE AU/NZ, *the ABC,* THE AUSTRALIAN, *Australian Music Vault and more.*

LEFT: SAVITRI WENDT, RIGHT: SUPPLIED

**3%**

Kill The Dead

**1788 RECORDS/ VIRGIN MUSIC GROUP**

★★★★★

IF A DEBUT ALBUM is meant to be a statement of intent, *Kill The Dead*, by Blak music collective 3%, is a rallying call to attention. The group was born in 2022, after initial collaboration sessions between MCs Nooky and Dallas Woods became a full-blown project featuring a third player in singer-songwriter Angus Field.

Their first single, the powerful “Our People”, was quick to capture the attention of audiences: a smart use of The Presets club classic, fused with a passionate delivery of lyrics and insights into the struggles of First Nations people in this country. As a taster of what a full studio project could sound like from 3%, the immediacy of the message and the diversity in sound was clear.

Although covering weighty themes of reclamation, Indigenous deaths in custody and closing the gap, *Kill The Dead* is more than an album that is built on songs and stories of protest. It’s also a beautifully celebratory moment for Blak musicians and artists. The arrival of this album is poignant, as the Australian music space is being flooded with the talents of a new generation of Blak excellence.

Featuring dynamic collaborative moments with artists including Jessica Mauboy on album highlight “Won’t Stop”, Tia Gostelow on “Sleezy Steezy” and Marlon Motlop on album opener “Black Australia Policy”, the sonic palette of *Kill The Dead* is ambitious and unafraid to lean into vulnerability and beauty, as it is content to flex within the visceral rap energy fans may associate with an artist like Nooky. The spirit that weaves throughout this album is natural; the chemistry between the members of 3% striking for a group that has only been together a short period of time. Timing is everything, and the connection between these artists feels perfectly aligned – this is music that has never been more relevant, or needed.

**SOSEFINA FUAMOLI**

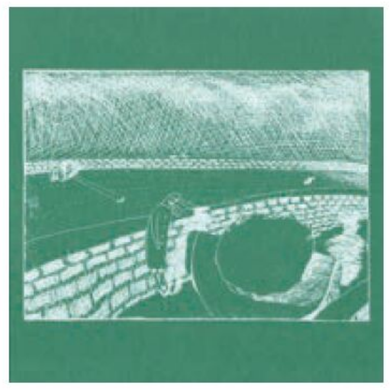
INSIDE

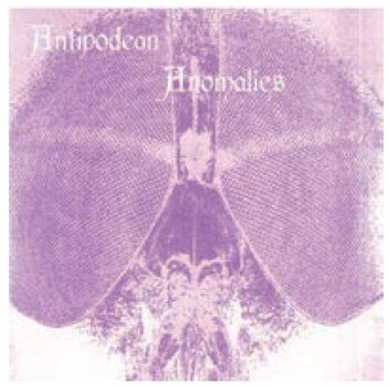
# Australia and New Zealand's Reissue Record Label Scene

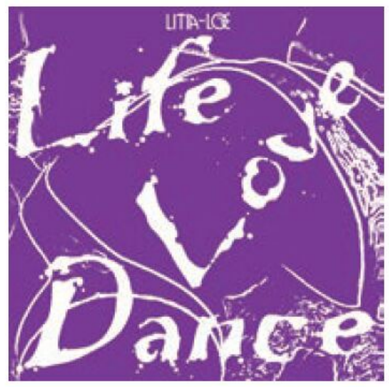
## By Martyn Pepperell

Meet the passionate music fans and keen-eared curators on an obsessive quest to dig deep into the record crates and unearth forgotten — and unfairly unloved — gems of the past so they get a second chance at finding the recognition they deserve

***Oz Echoes: DIY Cassettes And Archives 1980 - 1989*** Various Artists





In 1977, Leong Lau had Sydney's cosmopolitan nightlife grooving to a singular fusion of Malay folk music, jazz and psychedelic funk sung with a cheeky Aussie accent. That year, the Malaysia-born Chinese Australian musician released his second album, *That Rongeng Sound*, before continuing a circuitous life journey that has seen him spend stints playing flute with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, working in theatre in the UK and conducting stem cell research in Switzerland.

In the mid-2000s, Lau's albums acquired a cult reputation among record collectors and DJs as some of the most interesting, rare, and highly sought-after Australian records from the late 1970s. Thirty-eight years after it was first released, two Melbourne music lovers, Chris Bonato and Anthony Walsh, launched their label Left Ear Records with a remastered vinyl reissue of *That Rongeng Sound*.

When we talk about Lau, Bonato tells me that due to wear and tear, they had to locate three copies to restore the audio. Despite the challenges, after they met with Lau, his idiosyncratic sound and mercurial mode of existence made the music impossible to put

down. "Half the story is the story of the artists," Bonato enthuses. "You try to find someone genuine who you really believe in. They haven't just created a persona; they really live it." Since then, Left Ear Records has reissued equally fascinating records by an American electro-funk musician dressed as a spaceman, a collective of soundtrack musicians from 1980s Brisbane, and a mysterious Arabic wedding singer from Sydney, among others.

Welcome to the world of reissue labels, a culture of deep music obsessives who trawl record stores, op shops, garage sales, and YouTube channels. Constantly searching for neglected, unappreciated, and forgotten gems from the past, they work with the artists and networks of like-minded DJs, broadcasters, journalists and film and television music supervisors to give these moments of magic the recognition they deserve.

Over the last decade, a loose grouping of Australian and New Zealand-run reissue labels, including Left Ear Records, Efficient Space, Isle of Jura, Strangelove Music and A Colourful Storm, have pushed an antipodean voice into the global conversation. By uncovering half-forgotten alternative musical histories on both sides of the Tasman, they've given one-of-one originals like Lau a well-deserved spotlight.

**"DJs and music fans are actively looking into the past to find something overlooked and parallels in underground culture to hold onto that history and retell it."**

BRIDGET SMALL

"I think that reissue labels from Australia and Aotearoa have fostered more curiosity in music listeners all over," explains Bridget Small, a Melbourne-based broadcaster and self-described music nerd. Small started working with Left Ear Records in 2018 and has been involved ever since. "DJs and music

Leong Lau

LEONG LAU: SUPPLIED

fans are actively looking into the past to find something overlooked and parallels in underground culture to hold onto that history and retell it," she continues. "This is reflected locally in what we hear on the radio, what records people buy, film soundtracks and what shows people attend."

Michael Kucyk, the founder of Efficient Space, was introduced to reissues by London's Soul Jazz Records and two trailblazing independent labels from Australia, Chapter Music and The Roundtable. Last year, he housesat for a friend with an extensive collection of ska, soul, rocksteady, reggae, funk, post-punk and Latin music compilations released by Soul Jazz Records in the late Nineties and early Noughties. "It was amazing to revisit them and realise how many of the artists featured on those compilations are now household names," he says. "Back then, you didn't have beginner's guide Spotify playlists, so these compilations were a real reference point. I remember listening to some of them and realising I wanted to do something like that when I was older."

Bonato from Left Ear Records credits Soul Jazz Records, Chapter Music, and The Roundtable as similarly influential. "Soul Jazz [Records] gave me the perspective that you could do a funk release, something a bit rockier, something electronic, and have it all under the one label," he enthuses. "Chapter Music was the blueprint. They released these Australian post-punk compilations that made me think there must be a lot more interesting local music out there."

Growing up in Melbourne, Bonato and Kucyk both spent countless hours in record stores or listening to legendary community radio stations like 3RRR 102.7FM and PBS 106.7FM. By the mid-2000s, Kucyk was hosting his own eclectic 3RRR show, Noise In My Head (NIMH), and uploading recordings online. Not long after, something surprising happened. "I started getting all these emails from people overseas listening to the show," he says. "When they visited Australia, DJs like Juan Aitkins and Andrew Weatherall guested with me, and it mushroomed out from there."

Alongside its strong record store and radio culture, Melbourne's music community has long benefitted from a culture of vinyl-friendly lounge bars and DJs playing between bands at venues. "You can go out any night of the week and hear someone playing records, which may or may not be palatable," Bonato explains. While the DJ isn't always the centre of attention, these sorts of gigs allowed Bonato, Kucyk and their peers to dig even deeper into their musical obsessions.

In 2015, Kucyk launched Efficient Space with an EP of ambient techno from the Australian synthesiser enthusiast Braden Schlager. Between 2016 and 2017, he finally scratched that itch he'd had since discovering Soul Jazz Records by releasing three compilation albums: *Sky Girl*, *Midnite Spares*, and *Oz Waves*. "They fast-tracked the label's growth massively," Kucyk reflects. "It wasn't by design. It just happened that three things worth doing were presented to me simultaneously."

*Sky Girl*, compiled by the French record collectors DJ Sundae and Julien Dechery, was a staggering survey of private press lounge music, new wave, and dream-pop recorded between 1961 and 1991 worldwide. *Midnight Spares* and *Oz Waves* were rich explorations of 1980s/1990s avant-pop, DIY electronica and post-punk in Australia, respectively excavated by Kucyk's musician friends Andr ás and Instant Peterson and the Amsterdam-based Australian graphic designer and DJ Steele Bonus.

From there, Efficient Space has reissued Australian music by Yolngu songmen Waak Waak Djungi, 1980s minimal wave artist Karen Marks, and the 1990s dream-pop band Hydroplane, among other feted projects. "Michael [Kucyk] has the experience of being a DJ who knows how to put a set together in a really interesting way," explains the DJ, broadcaster, and former Skylab Radio programming coordinator Tess Monaghan. "Not many people can contextualise music like that. It's a rare person who can successfully run a reissue label. You need that ear. Not many people have it, but listeners responded really well to being treated to it."

When the New Zealand record collector and DJ Ben Stevens, aka Longboss, heard Efficient Space's *Midnight Spares* compilation, he felt compelled to share the untold stories of weird pop music from his home. "*Midnight Spares* had this larrikin attitude to music that made me smile and think about our own parallels here," he says. It's this thing of living on the edge of the world, where you have this slightly nihilistic bleak humour in the mix. When you live in the antipodes, it's easy to look outwards, but there are also tales here to tell."

A product of Wellington's 1990s warehouse rave scene, Stevens spent the middle years of the decade DJing techno and working in record stores. In 1998, feeling disillusioned with the sound of then-contemporary dance music, he moved to London. Over the next six years, he fell in with a circle of open-eared record collectors and DJs who were looking backwards to look forwards. "It was an inspiring time," Stevens remembers. "During those years, my head was filled with 40 years of dance music lineage. It was a rabbit hole I happily fell down."

Since he was a teenager, Stevens had dreamed of running a record label. In 2018, he finally got his shot when he inaugurated his Strangelove Music label with *Jardim Zoológico*, a two-song EP of leftfield art-pop by the 1980s Portuguese pop star Lena d'Água. "Context is everything with music," Stevens says. "I'm interested in visionary, out-of-time musicians doing something that was maybe lost on their peers at the time."

Michael Kucyk

Ben Stevens aka Longboss

**“Not many people can contextualise music like that. It’s a rare person who can successfully run a reissue label. You need that ear.”**

TESS MONAGHAN

Two years later, Stevens responded to *Midnight Spares* with *Kiwi Animals: Future/ Primitive Aotearoa*, a collection of 11 oddball songs recorded between 1982 and 1991 in New Zealand. Although his starting point was “Dancing”, a futuristic, machine-pop single recorded by the Auckland minimal wave trio Ballare, he arrived at a collection of musical outliers with outsider attitudes. “There’s a number eight wire attitude here that is very much about inventing things based on the materials you have at hand,” he explains. “It’s a key thing to remember and explains why New Zealand [noise rock] groups like The Dead C have been so well received overseas.”

Alongside his Kiwi investigations, Stevens became fascinated with leftfield music from Australia, leading him to reissue two early-Eighties acts from Sydney, synth-pop artists Arvo and Scribble, the latter the dream-pop project of the songwriter and screenwriter Johanna Pigott, who later co-wrote “Age of Reason” for John Farnham with Dragon’s Todd Hunter. Similarly, Bonato from Left Ear Records developed a taste for avant-garde experimentation from the other side of the Tasman, leading to the release of *Antipodean Anomalies 1 & 2*, two compilations of eccentric gems from Australia and New Zealand.

For Johanna Pigott, Strangelove reissuing Scribble was an opportunity for reflection and gratitude. “I think my music sits better in today’s broader musical landscape,” she says. “The most interesting thing is that I realise how fortunate I was to have had the opportunity [then and now]. I was a lucky hapless weirdo. Scribble was the cloak I surrounded myself in and the vehicle for collaboration with many very talented people. The list is long. The fact that the music is still out there is amazing.”

In the time they’ve been running, Left Ear Records, Efficient Space, Strangelove Music, Isle of Jura and their peers have seen reissued music grow from a specialist record store concern to appearing in mainstream cinema soundtracks and high-profile streaming service playlists. “When I started, it was quite niche,” reflects Kevin Griffiths, the Adelaide-based founder of Isle of Jura.

Griffiths, a longstanding DJ, producer, and music industry worker, established Isle of Jura in 2014 after relocating with his family to Australia from the UK. Across the label's open-eared catalogue, he has dug into the rich histories of Caribbean dance music, UK street soul, boogie, ambient, Afro-funk and the Balearic Beat. “For my first few releases, I was aiming at diggers, collectors, and obsessives, but now it feels much broader than that,” he continues.

These days, however, the audience isn’t just broader; it’s deeper as well. As Bonato puts it, “When we were four or five years into Left Ear, the next generation was already well and truly developed from hearing all the reissues and had much more eclectic taste.” It’s not just record collectors, DJs, or casual listeners, either. In 2022, the British pop star Harry Styles named his third album *Harry’s House*, in homage to the Japanese music legend Haruomi “Harry” Hosono’s 1973 debut album, *Hosono House*.

Closer to home in Australia and New Zealand, the impact of these previously neglected histories can be felt in the immaculately styled boogie, deep house and soul records released by labels and artist collectives such as Mānuka Recordings and Noa Records from Auckland and Sydney’s Planet Trip Records. “Once you fall into this world, you start to map out whole scenes that you were never part of because you came after,” enthuses Tess Monaghan. “When you get a greater appreciation and understanding of these scenes you enjoy and feel at home in, it feels really special.”

The knock-on benefits of this cultivated depth of engagement are also visible in the efforts of younger-generation reissue labels, like Melbourne’s Gazebo Records. Founded by Nick Saw and Danny Bodega, they launched this year with a 30th-anniversary vinyl release of the classic New Zealand street soul/R&B album *New Urban Polynesian* by Fuemana.

“To actually see this coming to fruition has been awesome for us,” says the group’s frontwoman, Christina Fuemana. “Those times were simpler for us,” adds her brother Tony. “When I listen to the album now, I remember how we were back then and what it meant to us. It was an amazing time, and it’s amazing that these Australian guys wanted to reissue it on vinyl. It blows my mind.”

Regardless of how they get there, however, the red thread that unites the listeners who have gathered around Left Ear Records, Efficient Space, Strangelove Music, Isle of Jura and their peers is the thrill of finally being able to hear and own these beautifully restored and packaged reissues.

“When you do a reissue, you're fulfilling someone's dream of being able to get hold of this record,” Griffiths says. He pauses briefly before making a statement that sums up what it’s all about. “It feels like you’re making a real contribution to the musical landscape by making something available again, and that feels really good.” ®

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# Fake Photos, Real Harm: AOC and the Fight Against AI Porn

*Deepfakes are easier to make than ever – and our sense of reality and democracy are at risk*

By LORENA O'NEIL

ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ was in a car talking with her staffers about legislation and casually scrolling through her X mentions when she saw the photo. It was the end of February, and after spending most of the week in D.C., she was looking forward to flying down to Orlando to see her mum after a work event. But everything left her mind once she saw the picture: a digitally altered image of someone forcing her to put her mouth on their genitals. Adrenaline coursed through her, and her first thought was "I need to get this off my screen." She closed out of it, shaken.

"There's a shock to seeing images of yourself that someone could think are real," the congresswoman tells me. It's a few days after she saw the disturbing deepfake, and we're waiting for our food in a corner booth of a retro-style diner in Queens, New York, near her neighborhood. She's friendly and animated throughout our conversation, maintaining eye contact and passionately responding to my questions. When she tells me this story, though, she slows down, takes more pauses and plays with the delicate rings on her right hand. "As a survivor of physical sexual assault, it adds a level of dysregulation," she says. "It resurfaces trauma, while I'm trying to – in the middle of a fucking meeting."

The violent picture stayed in Ocasio-Cortez's head all day.

"There are certain images that don't leave a person, they can't leave a person," she says. "It's not a question of mental strength or fortitude – this is about neuroscience and our biology." She tells me about scientific reports she's read about how it's difficult for our brains to separate visceral images on a phone from reality, even if we know they are fake. "It's not as imaginary as people want to make it seem. It has real, real effects not just on the people that are victimised by it, but on the people who see it and consume it."

"And once you've seen it, you've seen it," Ocasio-Cortez says. "It parallels the same exact intention of physical rape and sexual assault, [which] is about power, domination, and humiliation. Deepfakes are absolutely a way of digitising violent humiliation against other people."

She hadn't publicly announced it yet, but she tells me about a new piece of legislation she's working on to end nonconsensual, sexually explicit deepfakes. Throughout our lunch, she keeps coming back to it – something real and concrete she could do so this doesn't happen to anyone else.

Deepfake porn is just one way artificial intelligence makes abuse easier, and the technology is getting better every day. From the moment AOC won her primary in 2018, she's dealt with fake and manipulated images, whether through the use of Photoshop or generative AI. There are photos out there of her wearing swastikas; there are videos in which her voice has been cloned to say things she didn't say. Someone created an image of a fake tweet to make it look like Ocasio-Cortez was complaining that all of her shoes had been stolen during the Jan. 6 insurrection. For months, people asked her about her lost shoes. These examples are in addition to countless fake nudes or sexually explicit images of her that can be found online, particularly on X.

Ocasio-Cortez is one of the most visible politicians in America right now – and she's a young Latina woman up for reelection in 2024, which means she's on the front lines of a disturbing, unpredictable era of being a public figure. An overwhelming 96 per cent of deepfake videos are nonconsensual porn, all of which feature women, according to a recent study by the cybersecurity company DeepTrace Labs. And women who face multiple forms of discrimination, including women of colour, LGBTQ+ people, and women with disabilities, are at heightened risk to experience technology-facilitated gender-based violence, says a report from U.N. Women.

In 2023, more deepfake abuse videos were shared than in every other year in history combined, according to an analysis by independent researcher Genevieve Oh. What used to take skillful, tech-savvy experts hours to Photoshop can now be whipped up at a moment's notice with the help of an app. Some deepfake websites even offer tutorials on how to create AI pornography.

What happens if we don't get this under control? It will further blur the lines between what's real and what's not – as politics become more and more polarised. What will happen when voters can't separate truth from lies? And what are the stakes? As we get closer to the presidential election, democracy itself could be at risk. And, as Ocasio-Cortez points out in our conversation, it's about much more than imaginary images.

"It's so important to me that people understand that this is not just a form of interpersonal violence, it's not just about the harm that's done to the victim," she says about nonconsensual deepfake porn. She puts down her spoon and leans forward. "Because this technology threatens to do it at scale – this is about class subjugation. It's a subjugation of entire people. And then when you do intersect that with abortion, when you do intersect that with debates over bodily autonomy, when you are able to actively subjugate all women in society on a scale of millions, at once digitally, it's a direct connection [with] taking their rights away."

She's at her most energised in these moments of our conversation, when she's emphasising how pervasive this problem is going to be, for so many people. She doesn't sound like a rehearsed politician spouting out sound bites. She sounds genuinely concerned – distressed, even – about how this technology will impact humanity.

Ocasio-Cortez is living through this nightmare as she fights it. She's watched her body, her voice, everything about herself distorted into a horror-film version of reality. It's deeply personal, but if she can figure out the antidote to help end

PHOTOGRAPH IN ILLUSTRATION BY TOM WILLIAMS/CQ ROLL CALL/GETTY IMAGES

ILLUSTRATION BY **Matthieu Bourel**

this shape-shifting form of abuse, it could change how the rest of us experience the world.

Back in the early 2010s, before generative AI was widespread, abuse experts rang warning bells about altered images being used to intimidate communities online. Nighat Dad is a human-rights lawyer in Pakistan who runs a helpline for survivors being blackmailed using images, both real and manipulated. The consequences there are dire – Dad says some instances have resulted in honour killings by family members and suicide.

**THE FIGHTER** Ocasio-Cortez is co-leading the effort to stop AI abuse.

"This process has been going on for a while, and women of colour, feminists from the Global South have been raising this issue for so long and nobody paid any attention," Dad says.

In the US, Rep. Yvette Clarke (D-N.Y.) has tried for years to get Congress to act. In 2017, she began to notice how often Black women were harassed on social media, whether they were the targets of racist remarks or offensive, manipulated images. On the internet, bigotry is often more overt, where trolls feel safe hiding behind their screens.

"That's what really triggered me in terms of a deeper dive into how technology can be utilised overall to disrupt, interfere, and harm vulnerable populations in particular," Clarke says.

At the time, the technology around deepfakes was still emerging, and she wanted to establish guardrails and get ahead of the harms, before they became prevalent.

"It was an uphill battle," Clarke says, noting that there weren't many people in Congress who had even heard of this technology, let alone were thinking of regulating it. Alongside Clarke, Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.) was an exception; he introduced a bill in December 2018, but it was short-lived. On the House side, the first congressional hearing on deepfakes and disinformation was in June 2019, timed with Clarke's bill, the DeepFakes Accountability Act. The legislation was an attempt to establish criminal penalties and provide legal recourse to deepfake victims. She reintroduced it in September 2023.

In May 2023, Rep. Joe Morelle (D-N.Y.) introduced the Preventing Deepfakes of Intimate Images Act, which would have criminalised the sharing of nonconsensual and sexually explicit deepfakes. Like previous deepfake legislation, it didn't pick up steam. Clarke says she thinks it's taken a while for Congress to understand just how serious and pervasive of an issue this is.

Now, finally, people are starting to pay attention to the dangers of all types of AI abuse. Clarke is vice chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, which just announced the launch of an AI policy series that will look at this kind of technology through the lens of race. The series will address algorithmic bias in AI systems and will educate the public on misinformation, particularly in regard to disinformation campaigns against Black voters. And Clarke is a part of the House's new bipartisan task force on AI, alongside Ocasio-Cortez and 22 other members, plus the two leaders of the House.

"Thank God, folks have finally recognised that civil rights are being violated," Clarke says. "The work that we do now has implications not just for this generation, and not just for now, but for future generations. And that's why it's important that we act swiftly."

As the technology has advanced rapidly, so has the abuse. And as Clarke points out, the harm is no longer just focused on marginalised communities. It's become widespread, affecting teens and college students across the country. It can happen to anyone with a photograph online.

In May 2020, Taylor (who asked to use an alias to avoid further abuse) had just graduated college and was quarantining with her boyfriend in New England when she received an odd email, with the subject line: "Fake account in your name". A former classmate of hers had written the email, which started out, "Look, this is a really weird email to write, but I thought you would want to know".

The classmate went on to tell Taylor he'd seen a fake Pornhub account of hers with her name and personal information on it. "It looks like they used a deepfake to put your face on top of some videos", he wrote.

Confused, Taylor decided it must be spam. She sent the classmate a message on Facebook saying, "Hey, I just want to let you know your account got hacked". No, he replied, it had been a genuine email.

Four years later, she recalls that she hadn't even known what a deepfake was at the time. She opened her boyfriend's computer and went to the Pornhub link her classmate messaged her. When the website loaded, she saw her face staring back at her in a sexually explicit video she'd never made.

"It was surreal seeing my face... especially the eyes," she tells me during a Zoom call. "They looked kind of dead inside... like the deepfake looked realistic but it doesn't quite look like – it looks like me if I was spacing out."

She noticed the account had multiple videos posted on it, with photos taken from her Facebook and Instagram pages. And the videos already had thousands of views. She read the comments and realised some people thought the videos were real. Even scarier, the Pornhub profile had all of her very real personal information listed: her full name, her hometown, her school. (A spokesperson for Pornhub says nonconsensual deepfakes are banned from the site and that it has teams that review and remove the content once they are made aware of it.)

Taylor started diving deeper online and realised multiple fake accounts with videos had been made in her name, on various sites.

Suddenly, Taylor realised why she'd seen an uptick in messages on all of her social media accounts the past few weeks. She immediately felt very concerned about her physical safety.

"I had no idea if the person who did it was near me location-wise, [or] if they were going to do anything else to me," Taylor says. "I had no idea if anyone who saw that video was going to try to find me. I was very physically vulnerable at that point."

She and her boyfriend called the local police, who didn't provide much assistance. Taylor played phone tag with a detective who told her, "I really have to examine these profiles", which creeped her out. Eventually, she says, he told her that this was technically legal, and whoever did it had a right to.

It was the first few months of Covid, and Taylor, who lives with anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder, says she'd already been facing a general sense of worry and paranoia, but this exacerbated everything. She got nervous when

**"It's so important to me that people understand that this is not just a form of interpersonal violence. This technology threatens to do it at scale – this is about class subjugation of entire people."**

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LORENA O'NEIL *wrote about women who work in AI for the September issue in the US.*

**"One of my big concerns is that we're just going to enter this post-truth world where nothing you see online is trustworthy, because everything can be generated in a very realistic yet fake way," Chowdhury says.**

going out that a stranger would recognise her from the videos. She fixated on who in her life had seen them. On the verge of starting graduate school, she wondered if future employers would find them and if her career would be over before it had even started.

In the months that followed, Taylor discovered that a girl she knew from school had also had this happen to her. Through their conversations, they were able to pinpoint a guy they'd both had a falling out with – a guy who happened to be very tech-savvy. As they continued to investigate, they came across multiple women from their college who'd been similarly targeted, all connected to this man they call Mike. But the state police were never able to prove he made the videos.

Taylor was one of the first to speak out about her AI abuse, anonymously sharing her story in the 2023 documentary *Another Body*. The filmmakers have started an organisation called #MyImageMyChoice to tackle intimate image abuse. In March, the organisers co-hosted a virtual summit on deepfake abuse, with legal experts, advocates, and survivors like actor Sophia Bush telling their stories.

Taylor says that in the aftermath of that deepfake, she often feels out of control of her own life. She compensates for it by trying to be in control of other situations. She repeatedly beeps her car to make sure that it's locked, and is often terrified the coffee pot is still on and her house is going to catch on fire. "I still deal with it today," she says of her heightened OCD.

Mike was interested in neural networks and machine learning, Taylor says, which is how she suspects he could have created the deepfake before there were easily accessible apps that did this instantaneously like there are now. According to #MyImageMyChoice, there are more than 290 deepfake porn apps (also known as nudify apps), 80 per prgsncent of which have launched in the past year. Google Search drives 68 per cent of traffic to the sites.

One of the people Taylor's been connected to in the online abuse-advocacy space is Adam Dodge, the founder of the digital-safety education organisation EndTAB (Ending Tech-Enabled Abuse). Dodge tells me people often underlook the extreme helplessness and disempowerment that comes with this form of tech-enabled trauma, because the abuse can feel inescapable.

For example, in revenge porn, when someone's intimate images are leaked by a partner, survivors often try to assert control by promising to never take pictures like that again. With a deepfake, there is no way to prevent it from happening because somebody can manifest that abuse whenever and wherever they want, at scale.

Dodge wants to reframe the conversation; instead of highlighting the phenomenon of new technology being able to create these hyperrealistic images, he wants to shift the focus to how this is creating an unprecedented amount of sexual-violence victims. He thinks that the more people are educated about this as a form of abuse, versus as a harmless joke, the more it could help with prevention.

He brings up a recent New Jersey school incident where someone made AI-generated nudes of female classmates. "The fact they were able to spin up these images so quickly on their phones with little to no tech expertise and engage in sexual violence and abuse at scale in their school is really worrisome."

RUMMAN CHOWDHURY is no stranger to the horrors of online harassment; she was once the head of ethical AI at X, back when it was called Twitter and before Elon Musk decimated her department. She knows firsthand how difficult it is to control harassment campaigns, and also how marginalised groups are often disproportionately targeted on these platforms. She recently co-published a paper for UNESCO with research assistant Dhanya Lakshmi on ways generative AI will exacerbate what is referred to in the industry as technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

"In the paper, we actually demonstrate code-based examples of how easy it is for someone to not just create harassing images, but plan, schedule, and coordinate an entire harassment campaign," says Chowdhury, who currently works at the State Department, serving as the US Science Envoy for AI, connecting policymakers, community organisers, and industry with the goal of developing responsible AI.

Chowdhury rattles off ways people can use technology to help them make at-scale harassment campaigns. They can ask generative AI to not only write negative messages, but also to translate them into different languages, dialects, or slang. They can use this information to create fake personas, so one person can target a politician and say that she's unqualified or ugly, but make it look like 10 people are saying it. They can use text-to-image models to alter pictures, which Chowdhury and Lakshmi did for their research, asking a program to dress one woman up like a jihadi soldier and changing another woman's shirt to say Blue Lives Matter. And they didn't have to trick or hack the model to generate these images.

And it's not just about generation, it's about amplification, which happens even when people aren't trying to be cruel. It's something Chowdhury often saw while working at X – people retweeting a fake photo or video, not knowing it's not real.

"People will inadvertently amplify misleading information all the time," Chowdhury says. "It is a very big problem and also one of the hardest problems to address because the individual did not have malicious intent. They saw something that looked realistic."

She says she thinks a lot of people have learned not to believe everything they read on the internet, but they don't have the same mental guard against video and audio. We tend to believe those are true, because it used to be difficult to fake them. Chowdhury says she doesn't know if we are all going to get better at identifying fake content, or if we will just stop trusting everything we see online.

"One of my big concerns is that we're just going to enter this post-truth world where nothing you see online is trustworthy, because everything can be generated in a very, very realistic yet fake way," Chowdhury tells me.

This is a human problem that needs a human solution. As Chowdhury points out, it's not an easy problem to solve, but it doesn't mean we shouldn't try to. She offers up a multiprong approach. Social media companies can track individual accounts to see if they are coordinating with other people, or whether the same IP address has multiple accounts. They can adjust the algorithms that drive what people are seeing. People can mobilise their own communities by talking about media literacy. Legislators can work on protections and regulations, and find protections that don't just put the onus on the survivor to take action. Generative-AI developers and the technology companies that platform them can be more transparent in their actions and more careful about what products they release to the public. (X didn't respond to a request for comment.)

Mary Anne Franks, a legal scholar specialising in free speech and online harassment, says it's entirely possible to craft legislation that prohibits harmful and false information without infringing on the First Amendment. "Parody and satire make clear that the information being presented is false – there is a clear line between mocking someone and pretending to be someone," she says.

"And while the Supreme Court has held that some false speech may be protected," she adds, "it has never held that there is a First Amendment right to intentionally engage in false speech that causes actual harm."

Franks wants to see legislation on deepfake-AI porn include a criminal component as well as a civil component, because, she says, people are more often fearful of

OPPOSITE PAGE: KENT NISHIMURA/"LOS ANGELES TIMES"/GETTY IMAGES

going to jail versus fearful of getting sued about something so abstract and misunderstood.

"While it is true that the US is guilty of overcriminalising many kinds of conduct, we have the opposite problem when it comes to abuses disproportionately targeted at women and girls," Franks says, citing how domestic abuse, rape, and stalking are underprosecuted.

Online abuse disproportionately targets marginalised groups, but it also often affects women in public spaces, like journalists or politicians. Women at the intersection of these identities are particularly vulnerable.

Rep. Summer Lee (D-Pa.) says she often thinks about how rapidly this technology is advancing, especially given the unprecedented levels of harassment public figures face on social media platforms.

"There is just such a fear that so many of us have, that there will be no mechanisms to protect us," Lee says. She says she already sees a world in which Black people and other marginalised folks are skeptical of the system following disinformation campaigns: "It makes voters and people who would otherwise run [for office] afraid that the system itself is untrustworthy. When I think about women who will run, especially Black and brown women, we have to think about the ways in which our images will be used and abused. That is a constant fear of women, and particularly women of colour, who think about whether or not they want to put themselves out on a limb to run for Congress.

"You lose control of yourself to an extent when you are putting yourself out there to run for office, but in this era, it takes on a new meaning of what it means to lose control of your image, of your personhood. The ways in which this technology can exploit and abuse it, how it can spread, it can ruin not just reputations but lives."

At the deli, Ocasio-Cortez tells me something similar. We're talking about how real the harm is for the victims of this kind of abuse. "Kids are going to kill themselves over this," she says. "People are going to kill themselves over this."

I ask Ocasio-Cortez what she would tell a teenage girl who has been victimised by AI abuse. "First of all, I think it's important for her to know and what I want to tell her is that society has failed you," she says. "Someone did this to you and it's wrong, but society has failed you. People should not have the tools to do this.

"My main priority is making sure that she doesn't internalise it, that the crime is not complete," Ocasio-Cortez says. I ask her how she personally deals with it – is there something she does to avoid internalising the abuse?

"I think of it not as an on switch or an off switch," she says, adding that she often has young women asking her how it's so easy for her to speak up. "It's not," she tells me. She slows down again, choosing her words carefully. "I think of it as a discipline, a practice. It's like, 'How good am I going to be at this today?' Because some days I suck, some days I do internalise it, some days I don't speak up because things have gotten to me."

Ocasio-Cortez says that a lot of her politics are motivated by a sense of not wanting other people to experience the things that she or others have. "A lot of my work has to do with chain breaking, the cycle breaking, and this, to me, is a really, really, really important cycle to break," she says.

We talk about Taylor Swift's sexually explicit AI photos that went viral in January – she remembers being horrified when she heard about them. She'd already been working on the deepfake-AI legislation when it happened, but she says the Swift incident helped accelerate the timeline on the bipartisan, bicameral legislation. Sens. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) are leading the Senate version of the bill, while Ocasio-Cortez leads the House version. It's called the Disrupt Explicit Forged Images and Non-Consensual Edits (DEFIANCE) Act of 2024. The legislation amends the Violence Against Women Act so that people can sue those who produce, distribute, or receive the deepfake pornography, if they "knew or recklessly disregarded" that the victim did not consent to those images.

The bill defines "digital forgeries" as images "created through the use of software, machine learning, artificial intelligence, or any other computer-generated or technological means to falsely appear to be authentic". Any digital forgeries that depict the victims "in the nude or engaged in sexually explicit conduct or sexual scenarios" would qualify. If the bill passes the House and Senate, it would become the first federal law to protect victims of deepfakes.

**"When I think about women who will run [for office], especially Black and brown women, we have to think about ways our images will be used and abused," Lee says.**

The bill has support from both sides of the aisle, bringing together unlikely partners. For example, Rep. Nancy Mace (R-S.C.), who has publicly feuded with Ocasio-Cortez in the past, is a co-sponsor of the DEFIANCE Act.

"Congress is spearheading this much-needed initiative to address gaps in our legal framework against digital exploitation," says a spokesperson for Mace, who recently introduced her own bill criminalising deepfake porn. "Together, we are combating this chilling new wave of abuse against women and confronting the alarming rise in deepfake child pornography. We aim to bring perpetrators to justice and ensure the safety and security of all individuals in the digital realm."

Durbin tells me he thinks the key to passing DEFIANCE into law is its significant bipartisan support.

"I really believe that politicians from both political parties and every political stripe are coming to the realisation that this is a real danger," he says, adding that having Ocasio-Cortez as a partner on the DEFIANCE Act is important.

"I'm saddened that she's gone through this experience personally," says Durbin. "But it certainly gives her credibility when she speaks to the issue."

At lunch, I ask Ocasio-Cortez if she thought the fact that she was the youngest woman to serve in Congress – and a woman of colour – has to do with why she's a lightning rod for this type of harassment.

"Absolutely," she says, without a moment's hesitation. I ask her why she thinks people often target women in leadership roles.

"They want to teach us a lesson for being there, for existing: This is not your place, and because you're here, we're going to punish you," she says.

We talk about fascinations people have with public figures, whether they're artists, influencers, or politicians.

"People increasingly, since the emergence of smartphones, have relied on the internet as a proxy for human experience," Ocasio-Cortez says. "And so if this becomes the primary medium through which people engage the world, at least in this country, then manipulating that becomes manipulating reality."

The fight for reality can sometimes feel futile. Facing the AI frontier, it's hard not to feel an undercurrent of dread. Are we entering a post-truth world where facts are elusive and society's most marginalised are only further abused? Or is there still time to navigate toward a better, more equitable future?

"There have been times in the past where I did have moments where I'm like, 'I don't know if I can survive this', " Ocasio-Cortez says quietly. "And in those moments sometimes I remember, 'Yeah, that's the point. That is quite literally the point'. I was the youngest woman elected to Congress, and it took over 200 years for a woman in her twenties to get elected to Congress, when this country was founded by 25-year-old dudes! Do people think that's a fucking coincidence?"

She's back to being animated, and she seamlessly ties it back to her work: "It is by design, and even the AI represents – not AI in general, but this use of AI – the automation of that design. It's the automation of a society where you can have an entire country be founded by 25-year-old men, but it takes over 200 years for a 29-year-old woman to get elected to Congress. And then once she is elected, they do everything in their power to get her to leave."

She leans in and smiles.

"And guess what, motherfuckers? I'm not going anywhere. Deal with it." ®

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# America's First

# Olympic B-Boy

Victor Montalvo set out to be the best breaker in the world. Nobody ever thought that would mean going for gold

**By Brandon Sneed**

Photographs by Thalía Gochez

VICTOR MONTALVO DRIVES the most yellow vehicle in Los Angeles County, a 1987 Mitsubishi SUV he just purchased off of Craigslist. He pulls through the security gate at a sprawling Santa Monica office compound, parks, and removes a gold chain and ring he bought in India last year. The sunglasses stay on. Just back from Japan, he's jetlagged as hell. "I swear it's not a hangover," he says, chuckling. "Just feels that way." But alas, he must train.

You'd probably call Montalvo a break dancer; they call themselves "breakers" and what they do "breaking." The breaking world knows Montalvo as "B-Boy Victor" – they're all B-boys and B-girls – and he's one of the best that competitive breaking's ever seen. He's won every major breaking event that's existed, most of them multiple times. When he won the World DanceSport Federation Breaking World Championships last September, that qualified him as the United States' first-ever Olympic breaking representative.

The International Olympic Committee made the announcement in 2020: Breaking would be in the 2024 Paris Olympics, transforming what the sport means to the world and what's possible for its breakers. "It's fucking great," says David "Kid David" Schreibman from Los Angeles, a 35-year-old breaking icon and commentator for Red Bull's BC One competitions. "Because guys like Victor are making a living like I wish I could have... That was my dream. We never got any of that. We had to be the fucking background dancers for Justin Bieber. Also cool, but not *this* cool."

However, Montalvo will be 30 years old in Paris, the upper limit of breakers' competitive prime. He's concerned. "The kids now are crazy," Montalvo says. "They're like, flying. Incredible stamina. I'm not the same as when I was younger. I'm not as fast, as strong. Maybe more creative. But it's getting tougher."

"Breaking has to be one of the hardest things in the world," Schreibman says. "You need the athleticism of a professional athlete, but you also need to be an artist, and you need to dance. It's like asking Picasso to mountain climb. That's what makes breaking so hard – that element of needing someone who's creative, but also has the highest athletic ability."

Hence the training, jet-lag be damned.

After lunch, Montalvo goes to a state-of-the-art gym with cutting-edge equipment, high ceilings, and walls that open like doors, letting in the beautiful Southern California weather. A trainer appears. The workout begins. He goes for an hour, mostly core work. He does it right. The final exercise requires Montalvo to assume a modified plank position by holding one end of a barbell elevated by a 20.4-kilogram plate on it; the other, empty end is secured at floor level. Montalvo rolls the barbell to his right, controlling his body down to a halt parallel with the floor, then he raises himself back up by pulling the barbell back beneath him. He repeats this to his left.

Over the next week, almost every day will see Montalvo train, do interviews and photo shoots, and dance for hours. Many nights end with beers and mezcal shots. He has endless energy, like a soul determined to make full use of its body.

He's also quiet, humble, steady. "I have made it so far from where I started," he says. "Gold is the last possible thing to achieve. And this is probably my only chance."

Thing is, there was a point last year when Montalvo didn't think he'd make the Olympics. "I thought I'd lost it," he says, "wondering, 'Do I still got it?'"

Not long before that, burned out and grieving a sudden loss, Montalvo nearly quit competitive breaking for good. Getting here meant facing that pain again by leaning on lessons imparted by the man whose death he grieved

MONTALVO'S PATH TO the Olympics began in 1999, when he was six years old and his father, Victor Sr., and uncle Hector watched the 1984 movie *Beat Street*. Hollywood's first motion picture about breaking, it featured Rock Steady Crew, the world's first professional breaking group; they'd first appeared in the 1982 documentary *Wild Style* and the 1983 film *Flashdance*.

Years prior, in Puebla, Mexico, when Victor Sr. and Hector first saw those movies on Betamax tapes, it was like they were charismatics struck by the Holy Ghost, dropping to the floor to copy the dance moves. They formed a breaking crew, found jams, battled other breakers, and by the mid-Eighties, traveled around Mexico competing and dreaming of winning global competitions in breaking's capital, New York City.

The scene quickly died out in Mexico, however, leaving Victor Sr. and Hector to sate their artistic passions by starting a heavy-metal band. In time they made a new home, near their mother in Kissimmee, Florida, where Victor Sr. worked as a cook.

But now, watching *Beat Street* with his son, he saw the music and dancing do the same thing to his boy it had once done to him, young Victor's eyes glued wide to the screen. "You know," his father said, "I used to do that, too."

Then he did it again. He "mopped the floor" by popping up onto a shoulder with his head on the floor and his legs in the air and scooching along, and did a "windmill", spinning on his back and shoulders with his legs whirling toward the sky. And then he spun on his head. Montalvo remembers watching captivated. "Then I tried to do them," Montalvo recalls, "and I would just fall over. I just, like, threw myself. But I loved it."

Around that time, breaking underwent what one breaker called "a seismic leap" when Red Bull put on its inaugural Lords of the Floor event in 2001. LOTF treated breakers like professional athletes, covering travel costs for crews from all over the world, providing masseuses for dancers between rounds, and handing out $6,200 in prize money, then more than any other event. One breaker at the time said, "[It was] the first time B-boys were treated like rock stars."

By age 10, Montalvo "was obsessed", spending days on end with his cousin in the driveway or bedroom, dancing and spinning on cardboard.

Breaking has four core elements. "Top rock" refers to movements while standing. "Part of top rock" includes footwork – self-explanatory. "Down rock" means moves done on the floor. "Freeze" is any moment when a breaker, well, freezes, usually while holding an unusual position. Down rock is the most crucial element, comprising myriad movements including spins, footwork, transitions, and power moves in which breakers spin their bodies on hands, elbows, shoulders, or their backs or heads. They can appear to defy gravity and the laws of physics, the result of extraordinary athleticism and strength. The most recognisable power move is probably the air flare, in which breakers spin while upside down and balancing on one arm.

The first move Montalvo mastered was the windmill. He remembers the exact moment, in his cousin's bedroom, on a flattened cardboard box, when he got some momentum and launched himself to the floor on his shoulders and sent his legs flying in a circle. "It was the best feeling ever," he says. "Like, 'I got my first move.'"

**"Gold is the last possible thing to achieve," Montalvo says. "And this is my only chance."**

Victor Sr. built his son a studio in the backyard, cobbling together money for supplies, then doing the labour himself with a friend's help. Montalvo practically lived in it.

One day a teacher handed out paper apples with a question: What do you want to be when you grow up? Montalvo wrote, "The best B-Boy in the world."

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BRANDON SNEED *is an author and journalist. This is his first story for* ROLLING STONE.

◀ **Breaker Montalvo with his 1987 Mitsubishi SUV**

IN 2008, when Montalvo was 14, he went to his first major breaking event, Outbreak, in Orlando, organised by the legendary David "MexOne" Alvarado. "I saw so many breakers that were so different and original," Montalvo says. "They just had this dope aura around them."

He began sneaking out at night to go to jams with cousins and friends. "I knew they were sneaking out," Victor Sr. says. "I just didn't say anything. But I thought they were going to friends' houses or something. I didn't know sometimes they went to, like, freaking Miami."

Montalvo begged his family for travel money, consumed by the sport. "Once we started going to events and watching people dance, I'm realising, 'Wow, I'm not that good'," Montalvo says. "I need to go back and learn what they know. And from there, you start picking people's brains. 'How are you doing this?' 'How do you get this move?' And you just learn the culture, the essence of the dance... My mind started going 'How did they get this way?' And that's when I got more curious about the culture side of the dance, and the roots of it."

Some researchers put breaking's roots centuries deep, dating back to warriors from the Angola region of Africa who performed similar dance movements as rituals to showcase agility, strength, and solidarity. Its modern evolution began in 1960s New York City, born out of the Bronx's burgeoning hip-hop culture – not as sport but as art, a blend of dancing, gymnastics, and martial arts. People dance-battled to settle conflicts. "Literally, gangs showing up to another gang's party," Schreibman says, "and they would literally dance it out."

They'd throw down with nothing between their skin and the street, art becoming scars. "People would get bald spots on their head," Montalvo says, remembering videos his father showed him as a boy. "It was a pride thing."

Nobody trained. Hell, most didn't even stretch. And as Montalvo entered breaking culture, he found many still did it that way.

"Some people still want to keep it, like, real hip-hop," Montalvo says. "Breaking on concrete. No stretching. No diet. Just get up and drink and smoke and break. And that's how I used to be."

AS A TEENAGER, Montalvo began developing his own style, flowing between air moves and freezes, relying on spontaneity more than choreography. He joined his first crew, the MF Kidz. "We would have these crazy all-day sessions," he says. "We'd get high and just get lost in the moment, and that's when we'd come up with just crazy shit. That's when we'd get most of our signature moves."

The music mattered as much as the dance moves, with the rapper Afrika Bambaataa and R&B-jazz-funk fusion group the Blackbyrds and the Godfather of Soul himself, James Brown, fueling young Montalvo's long days and nights in the studio. He'd feel the music moving his body, often leaving him little say in the matter.

He found his signature move in 2012, at age 17, one he was the first to ever do – the Supa Montalvo: dropping into a crouch on one hand and spinning in 360s, an otherworldly feat of athleticism and strength.

"I didn't know what the fuck I'd just done," Montalvo says. He watched the video footage. "Like, the fuck? I just spun on my one hand three times?"

It was around then that Montalvo won the Red Bull BC One Cypher in Tampa, Florida. That earned him invitations to competitions abroad. To do that, however, and devote more time to professional competition, he would have to quit school.

His mother, Maria Guadalupe Montalvo, and Hector told him he couldn't do it; Victor Sr. argued with them. "They are paying for the freaking plane tickets and the hotel," he reasoned. "I don't have money to give him that. They are going to make it so where he can travel to Europe. What the hell are you talking about he can't do it?"

They had a point: The odds of making a living breaking weren't good. Event winnings alone wouldn't cut it – competitions rarely gave prizes above four figures. Some breakers like Schreibman eked out a living stringing together corporate gigs and Hollywood work. Many took other jobs to pay bills.

"He's going to be a nobody," said Hector.

"You know what?" Victor Sr. said. "Fuck you. It's my son. It's not your freaking son."

Victor Sr. borrowed $500 from his father to get an expedited passport and to give his son some cash while abroad.

Montalvo asked his dad if he was sure this was right. "Hey, if something happens, and you don't make it, then you don't make it," Victor Sr. said. "But follow your fucking dreams."

BUT THE PATH was fraught. Once, a man claiming to be some sort of manager paid Montalvo's way to El Salvador to judge a competition. "I shouldn't have gone," says Montalvo, who adds that the man ended up trying to manipulate him into giving up opportunities – while doing free work for him. "But it was a free chance to see more of the world."

One trip to London ended as soon as Montalvo deplaned. He called his father in tears. Authorities had detained him in an airport holding cell for immigration-law violations after a misunderstanding over visa requirements. "I was so young, and they were so skeptical," Montalvo says. "They were like, 'Yo, what the hell are

you doing coming here? You're only 17. Your parents are letting you come here by yourself?' And I didn't have money... I was in, like, immigration jail with people who'd been there for months and years."

Montalvo often attended competitions with no way home without prize money. "I never really thought about it," Montalvo says. "I didn't really have a plan. I just loved the movement. The way it made me feel, it was like my own world that I could tap into. I loved always reinventing myself and winning, and never really thought about the money. I just loved the art of it. And the money came naturally."

In 2013, at 18, Montalvo moved to Los Angeles. He stayed in a one-story home on Bundy Lane in Santa Monica, "the Bundy House". It rented for $4,660. Twelve people split it. And the Bundy House, Montalvo says, "was crazy". They all shared one bathroom and shower. And there were always guests. "People would just show up from Japan, Russia, Ukraine," Montalvo says. "Like, 'Yo, we come here to practice'. Just sleeping on couches. But then it was like a whole jam back here. We'd start at midnight and go until, like, noon, smoking, drinking, hanging out, dancing."

They were climbing a mountain as it formed. That year, the World DanceSport Federation held its first breaking world championships, further validating the sport.

Breaking's fan base swelled. Events drew tens of thousands. Gyms filled. Livestreams pulled hundreds of thousands of viewers. Breakers began signing modest sponsorship deals.

After performing admirably, in 2014 Montalvo was invited to join Squadron, a one-of-a-kind bicoastal crew founded by Schreibman and Alvarado. "He's an all-arounder," says Luis "Luigi" Rosada, a 37-year-old Squadron member. "He's really hard to beat. He can flip, power, spin, footwork. He can do it all. He's a perfect recipe for competition."

"There's a level to Victor that's super dangerous," Schreibman says. "His pace. His efficiency with his energy. Compare it to boxing. Victor doesn't do huge knockouts all the time. He's great at jab, jab, jab, jab."

The best competitive breakers find ways to surprise judges and opponents while remaining consistent, requiring a nearly-impossible balance between steady practice to refine and maintain one's abilities, and forever reinventing oneself. "I just don't think there's another competitive breaker who is as consistent and has the full package and can deliver it the way he does," Schreibman says.

But heartbreak conquers all. In 2015, breaking up with a longtime girlfriend left Montalvo feeling lost and depressed. Alvarado helped him course-correct, taking Montalvo to competitions by way of road trips, creating hours of conversation and mentorship.

An undocumented immigrant when he arrived to the States who later acquired his green card, Alvarado built Orlando's breaking culture, grew Outbreak into a global series of significant events, and became one of breaking's most iconic figures. Having grown up in the same area, and then taking him under his wing, nobody influenced Montalvo more. "He was telling me, 'You're going to be winning all of these amazing events, you're going to be winning 20 grand here and 20 grand there'," Montalvo says. He had his doubts. "That's so much money," he says. "I just didn't see me breaking at that level."

Alvarado argued otherwise. "He's the one who told me what could happen," Montalvo says. "He programmed me with this belief. 'Dog, you've already done it once'. I've beaten these people. 'So you can do it again'. And then everything he said was going to happen came into real life."

Suddenly, Montalvo experienced success the likes of which no breaker ever had. "That year," Rosada says, "he won everything."

The Red Bull BC One America Finals in his home region of Orlando. The inaugural Silverback Open in Philadelphia and the largest single-event prize – $23,300 – in breaking. The Freestyle Session World Finals in California. Then came the Red Bull BC One World Final in Italy, where Montalvo won a world title, becoming what he wrote on that apple when he was 10, the best B-boy in the world.

"Breakers just don't really go on winning streaks like that," says Schreibman. "It's so hard to put together back-to-back wins. But then this kid was winning everything."

"This guy made over 100 grand off jams," Rosada says. "This is the new thing. Vic was one of the first ones to do it... [Alvarado] saw it with him."

Montalvo gave his championship belt to his father; that made him cry. The belt still hangs in Victor Sr.'s bedroom.

**"He's hard to beat," Rosada says. "He can flip, power, spin, footwork. He can do it all."**

IN 2016, MONTALVO met Kate Pavlenko, "B-Girl Kate", in New York. An athletic, blue-eyed, brown-haired breaker from Ukraine, she had won a number of regional events and held her own near the top of the ranks worldwide. They bonded over a shared love of jazz and funk music. They grabbed drinks, went dancing, and spent days on end together.

When Pavlenko visited Montalvo in Los Angeles, they escaped the cramped conditions in the house by sleeping in a boat parked in the driveway. Later that year, when Montalvo returned home to Kissimmee to visit family, she went with him. "I loved his heart," she says. Much like Montalvo, Pavlenko speaks with a calm warmth, smiling often and choosing her words carefully. "He is a very kind person, and very easygoing. It felt easy to communicate with him, even though English is not my first language. I thought we were going to have a language barrier, but we didn't."

In August 2017, Montalvo and Pavlenko went on a road trip with Alvarado from Florida to Tennessee. "We were talking, he was on the phone watching *Superbad*, just laughing like crazy," Montalvo says.

A month later, Montalvo woke up to the news that Alvarado had passed away. Montalvo had just seen his friend a few weeks before – telling me about this loss, he has few words for it, like he still feels the heartbreak. "It was just so shocking," he says, shaking his head.

MONTALVO FINISHED 2017 as the top breaker in the world again, but losing Alvarado hit hard, and competitive breaking's relentless grind got old. "Everyone knows me and knows my moves and what I can do," he recalls. "I used to never practice for competition. I just did it because I loved it. Now I'm practicing for competition instead of just dancing and enjoying. It was getting exhausting."

"It's rough," says Schreibman. "Every other weekend, you're in an arena, and a guy's standing 30 metres away from you, and he's gonna do the same moves you saw last weekend, the music's gonna be the same as the weekend before."

How many times can you become a new you?

Creating further strain: Montalvo had become a full-fledged global celebrity in the breaking world, now with hordes of fans. A 2018 China visit left him disturbed when a group of breaking fans manhandled him as he left an event. "Grabbing me like I was a piece of meat," he says.

Then Covid hit, forcing a break from everything. He went hiking, mountain biking, snowboarding, surfing. He moved back home to Kissimmee, bought a house, and renovated it with his dad and family. Being back home felt good. But he missed Pavlenko, who was locked down in Ukraine. As soon as he could travel, he went there for four months. They traveled Russia together. He trained in muay thai and boxing. He mulled following the well-trod path of breakers past: go Hollywood, work music videos, commercials, movie deals, background dancing gigs, that sort of thing. It was viable.

"I've been doing it for 20 years," he says. "I was definitely just over it was like, 'I'm doing the Hollywood thing'."

Then came news from the International Olympic Committee that breaking would be included in the 2024 Paris Olympics.

One hell of a plot twist.

**◀ Montalvo celebrates his victory of the Red Bull BC One World Final at Hammerstein Ballroom in New York, USA on November 12th, 2022.**

"I'd never really watched the Olympics," Montalvo says, "other than 2012, London, watching Usain Bolt."

But he could see it now. The opening ceremonies, the global stage, medals around necks, a gold one around his. Sponsors connected him with Olympians past who shared the pride of representing home and country to the world, and taught him what opportunities awaited after a podium. "That inspired me," Montalvo says. "I said, 'OK, this makes it interesting again'."

RETURNING TO COMPETITION went well enough at first, so well that Montalvo again won the Red Bull BC One World Finals in 2022, claiming another belt. Through the first half of 2023, however, Montalvo entered three separate Olympic-qualifying events, and finished in third place each time. Doubt arose. "I didn't know if I could make it," he says. "I gave myself all this pressure."

Going into the World DanceSport Federation Breaking World Championships in Belgium, one of the last remaining Olympic-qualifying events, Montalvo had a near nervous breakdown. Everything felt off.

Montalvo remembered Alvarado. "I told myself what he would've told me," Montalvo says. "'Dog, you won so many countless events, international events. You did it all before. You can do it again'."

Montalvo and Pavlenko ran to a store to get what he liked – flat, white skater-style Adidas – but they didn't have his size. On their way out of the store, Pavlenko saw a mannequin wearing the shoes Montalvo wanted, but they were a size-and-a-half larger than Montalvo normally wore.

"She forced me to put 'em on," Montalvo says. But when he put on the bigger shoes they felt good. "Ended up being the perfect size."

Montalvo became not like his old self, exactly, but a new version, reinvented once again. Maybe he couldn't get high before the competition, but he found that place in his mind, letting go and dropping into the moment, opening his body to go where the music led.

He felt good. This carried him through round after round until the final competition scores were announced, and Montalvo had claimed the title and his spot in this winter's games in Paris.

Montalvo remembered being 10 years old and spending all day in a backyard studio, when the Olympics were never even a thought, a dream beyond a dream.

"I think I've surprised myself," he says. "I'm like, 'Damn, I can't believe I've been able to do this'."

IT WILL HAPPEN at Place de la Concorde on the Champs-Élysées. Montalvo will be one of two B-boys representing the United States through 16 rounds of one-on-one competition over two days. Day One will be a round-robin tournament, by the end of which eight will remain. Day Two will unfold in a seeded tournament format, culminating in breaking's first Olympic medals.

For those who've come before Montalvo, this moment brings mixed emotions.

"I'm low-key kinda jealous," says Rosada. "I've definitely had my bitter moments about it. I put in all this work, and this younger generation is reaping the benefits of it."

Then there's the diluted nature of Olympic competition. It will all be one-on-one, with little reflection of breaking's rich history of crew battles, let alone its origins in hip-hop culture. That's another thing: Public competitions can't use popular hip-hop music without paying expensive licensing fees, and the Olympics won't confirm whether or not they'll splash out for them. There's a chance the competitions will be held using stock beats.

"That's one of the hardest things," Montalvo says. "We fell in love with the dancing because we fell in love with the music. But when we compete we don't have the music we fell in love with, that made us dance at first."

"Some of the heart and soul is gone," Schreibman says. "My fear is that people are going to see a bunch of people onstage dancing to mechanical music and think that's breaking, and that's not what's really awesome about this culture... That's the counterculture side people don't see unless they go out and see it.

"The hours in the garage with your friends, playing these classic hip-hop records, creating movement that started in your brain and now it's in the world in raw form. That's what makes breaking beautiful."

Montalvo agrees. He invites me to the Bundy House.

I PULL UP TO the curb behind the yellow SUV and meet Montalvo in the driveway. The boat's still right there. Beyond, a gate; beyond that, an open garage. Graffiti covers the garage walls, along with signatures from countless visitors who've passed through. A couch and chairs line the walls; the middle stays clear, covered by padded flooring. Jose "Seize" Rivera spins R&B and funk records and smokes a spliff; he wears a black vest repping the crew he was born into back in the Bronx, the Mighty Zulu Kingz. David "Illy" Bennett, an MF Kidz founding member, now an actor and model who still performs with the L.A. Breakers on Venice Beach, breaks in slow, smooth moves. A dozen other people mingle throughout the garage and backyard, smoking and drinking.

Montalvo has his own place now, including a garage, but he still comes here most days.

He sheds his coat and jewellery and checks the laces on his shoes. Same ones he wore to win worlds and make the Olympics. Then he takes his turn. He eases in with some light footwork and bobbing of the head and shoulders, like a boxer getting loose, then he moves. A windmill. A freeze with his legs in a position akin to a soccer kick. A Supa Montalvo. He stops after a couple of minutes. There's light clapping. A toddler high-fives him.

Soon Pavlenko arrives, wearing baggy gray sweats and a navy hoodie. She pulls her hair back into a ponytail and gets in the mix.

People of all ages flow in and out of the centre, moving with the rhythms of the hip-hop tracks thumping through the speakers. The toddler attempts imitation, to moderate success but much fanfare. "That's it right there, baby," Montalvo says. "That's how it starts!"

This goes on for hours. Dancing, drinking, smoking, gassing each other up. It's the breaking version of sandlot baseball, of pickup hoops at the park, of a day at the beach with a board and good break. Then it's time to hit a nearby dive bar for dinner, darts, and pool, and a nine per cent Belgian beer called Delirium Tremens, then shots of mezcal.

The next few days with Montalvo unfold in kind. Training, Bundy House breaking, drinks with friends. A quiet happy hour at the Misfit in Santa Monica turns into mezcal-fueled competition at another bar with shuffleboard and Pop-A-Shot and claw machines.

A trip to a club ends with a bouncer refusing entry. Something about dress codes and Victor's oversize breaking pants. We've had enough mezcal that this could become a somewhat dramatic situation; the bouncer seems to sense this, perhaps invite it. Montalvo laughs. We hit another bar. When everyone else calls it a night, Montalvo wants to keep going. We make for Venice, where we close down the Brig.

"You ever get tired?" I ask.

He laughs.

"I am now," he says, but he doesn't mean the night. Every day's a new interview, photo shoot, TV spot to film.

"It's good," he says. "But not really my thing. I'm ready to focus on just dancing again. That's all what it's about. I don't really care about money or people knowing me or things like this. It's about the people, the culture, the dance, you know?

"It's about that garage." Ⓡ

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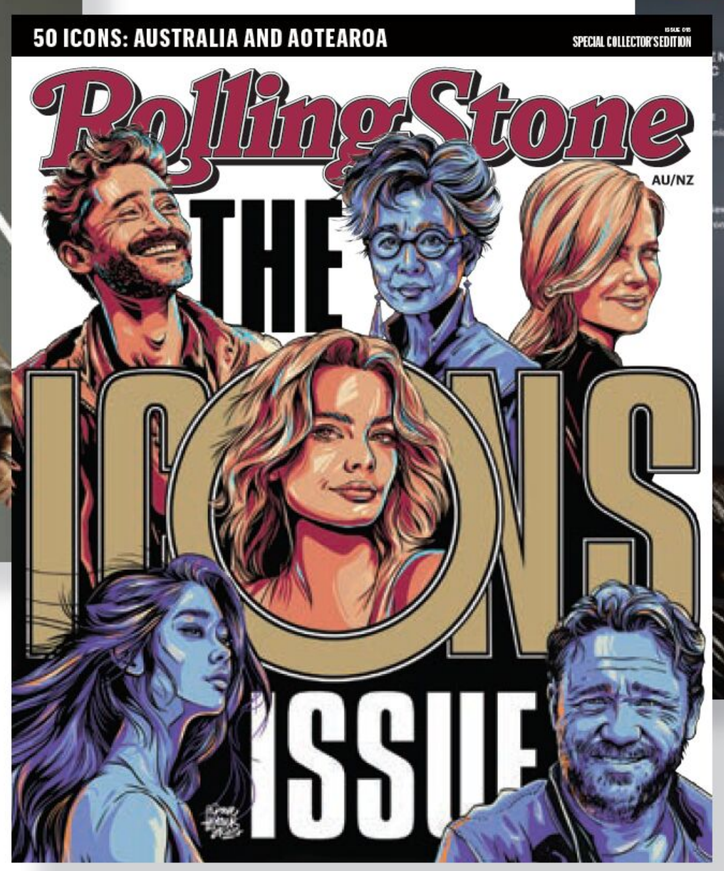

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National Affairs

# THE COST OF LIVING

*Australia's climate action ranks in the bottom 10 countries assessed in the Climate Change Performance Index. Immediate action is needed before it's too late – and the clock is now ticking louder than ever*

BY **HOLLY RANKIN**

BEN QUILTY

WHEN I WAS pregnant with my daughter, I held inside me a collection of cells that could live to the year 2150. I held in my womb my daughter Magnolia, whose tiny eggs were already formed. If one of them went on to grow inside her, and that person grew up to age 80, within me lived a 200-year life span. This information charged me with a direct line to the future. A future which, when I have the courage to peer into the gut-aching truth waiting for me – at the bottom of the pile of unfolded washing, of unanswered emails – demands action.

On current projection, by the year 2150, New York and London will be mostly underwater; the Netherlands, too. All of Bangladesh and Kolkata, all of the south of Thailand. The Tiwi Islands and a good majority of Papua New Guinea. The edges of Sydney and the heart of Melbourne, submerged.

At 3°C of warming, scientists predict the world could pass several catastrophic points of no return, from the runaway melting of ice sheets to the Amazon rainforest drying out. "Present trends are racing our planet down a dead-end 3°C temperature rise," says U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres. "The emissions gap is more like an emissions canyon."

The U.N. International Organisation for Migration has cited estimates of as many as one billion environmental migrants in the next 30 years, while more recent projections point to 1.2 billion by 2050, and 1.4 billion by 2060. After 2050, that figure is expected to soar as the world heats further and the global population rises to its predicted peak in the mid 2060s.

I swing between absorbing this information as if it were a Disney film – *10 years to save the world; delusional, warfaring old men wielding power; the patriarchy hanging on by a thread; young people and women rising up, but maybe not in time; who will save us* – and a seriously dire eulogy for the future and the planet that I know and love. Lapping at this global dilemma is the rising cost of rent, the financial impossibility of home ownership, $2.90 cucumbers and $7 milk, and the constant dripping away of the dream we were sold as kids. Work hard and you'll have a house, a family, clean water and a stable world. It's a lot to wrap your head around, but when you dig deep and start asking questions, it's all terribly and frighteningly related.

▲ Susan Conroy, inside her home in Lismore, nearly one year after the city's worst ever flood struck in late February, 2022.

We are living in the decisive decade. Scientists say we have until 2030 to cut global emissions by 75 per cent to stay under 1.5°C of warming, and cut them by 100 per cent by 2050 to avoid 3°C-plus of warming. But at the rate we are going, the global carbon budget will be fully spent in 2.5 years from now. Meeting this target would need a five-fold increase in global pledges. The latest IPCC report says that "exceeding 1.5°C is virtually inevitable".

Meeting these targets requires unprecedented global efforts and transformative changes across various sectors: energy, transportation, agriculture and industry. The most direct way to do the impossible? Policy. What does policy rely on? Politicians and governments. Politicians and governments who care about maintaining a secure existence for humans. Politicians who actually consider the planet that feeds, clothes and hosts them.

LEFT: BEN QUILTY, RIGHT: LINCOLN MAGEE

## THE STATE OF PLAY

HERE IN AUSTRALIA, we spin in the hamster wheel of a three-year electoral cycle. As quickly as things come together, they can fall apart. As quickly as leaders are elected, they are planning for election once again. This isn't all doom and gloom; it means that politicians are alert to the temperature of the times – if only they could feel it.

For young people, the 2024/25 election will be fought on the battlegrounds of the cost of living; for older generations, on wealth protection. And frankly, for many over-65s, this means hanging onto fossil fuels by the commas in their dividends.

So when does the end of the world become a matter for federal policy, what role might it play in the election, and what's stopping us from enacting the change that is so clearly needed?

Australia is one of the world's largest producers of fossil fuels. Our climate action ranks in the bottom 10 countries assessed in the Climate Change Performance Index. While national emissions have seen a dip of 24.7 per cent from 2005 levels, per capita emissions still soar above the OECD average. With a mere six years to chop off another 19 per cent to meet Labor's 43 per cent reduction target, the nation teeters on the edge of climate catastrophe. The trajectory of our current policies has us on a path to 3°C.

Labor's heralded *Climate Change Bill 2022* sets out a target of 43 per cent reduction from 2005 levels by 2030 and net zero by 2050. Labor's newly introduced Safeguard Mechanism requires Australia's highest greenhouse gas emitting facilities to adhere to the above targets, or pay for carbon credits. But put into practice, these bills are weak. Paradoxically, the Labor Government supports growth in fossil fuel production and export, with 116 new coal and gas projects expected to begin production before 2030, despite clear statements from the United Nations and the International Energy Agency (IEA) that new fossil fuel projects are incompatible with global temperature goals. Labor are also yet to make good on their promise to overhaul the country's environment laws (the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*), and there are plans to transfer approval of offshore gas projects to the Resources Minister, taking deep sea projects off the desk of Tanya Plibersek for good.

**"PRESENT TRENDS ARE RACING OUR PLANET DOWN A DEAD-END... THE EMISSIONS GAP IS MORE LIKE AN EMISSIONS CANYON."**

**U.N. SECRETARY-GENERAL ANTÓNIO GUTERRES**

While the cogs of Canberra grind slowly, it's clear that Australians want change. Three million houses have solar panels on their rooftops – more than 40 per cent of the electricity in our main national grid is already being met by clean sources of power. The 2022 election proved that Australians want rapid political change in the climate sphere, even if the government they voted in on that basis seems to forget this.

With billionaires like Gina Rhinehart donating millions to the Liberal party each year, and fossil fuel companies donating at least $2 million of disclosed donations to both major parties, is it actually possible to think we could phase out fossil fuel projects?

To understand how to overcome this zero sum game, I sat down with some of the people working in the belly of the beast, agitating for action.

## CHANGING THE GAME

SENATOR DAVID POCOCK told me, in characteristically plain speak, "We need legislated emission targets that are actually in line with the science."

And he's right. If we've learnt anything from the past few years, it would be to follow the science.

To make laws according to science, Australia needs to *legislate* 75 per cent emissions reduction by 2030, and 100 per cent emissions reduction by 2050. This means Net Zero by 2050, and that's coming late to the party.

Australian climate scientist Lesley Hughes says that we actually need Net Zero by 2040 to keep warming below 2°C. She said, "The single most important policy that Labor could take to

Senator David Pocock

the next election would be to cease approving new and extended fossil fuel developments. Every one of these adds to the damage being inflicted on our children's future."

For such rapid and radical change to occur, we need both major parties to commit to these reductions. In the words of Matt Kean, ex-NSW Minister for Climate and Energy, "What we need, more than ever, is political leaders who have conviction in Australia's renewable energy opportunity, who have the courage to do what's right, and the humility to reach across the aisle and build a broad consensus. This is in our national interest."

There is a strong history of bipartisanship resulting in positive policy, like the *Racial Discrimination Act* and the *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*. Seems like a while ago? Consider the Stage Three tax cuts, brought in during 2022 and due to take effect in July of this year. Although the policy was substantially amended by Labor, this is a piece of work handed between two parties across terms.

"Everyone was saying, 'It's going to be politically unfeasible to walk back any of those changes'," says Pocock. For him, the key is focusing on – and believing in – the end goal.

**“WE NEED LEGISLATED EMISSION TARGETS THAT ARE ACTUALLY IN LINE WITH THE SCIENCE.”**

**SENATOR DAVID POCOCK**

▶ Bernie Hartman, in the backyard of his home in Lismore. In late February, 2022, floodwaters reached 14.4 metres, two metres higher than the previous record of 12.15 metres in 1974.

“The tendency to think about what is achievable as the starting point is actually giving power to the fossil fuel industry. Instead, we’ve got to say, ‘What do we need for the country?’ and push for it, not simply ask, ‘What will be achievable?’. Because what will be achievable will stretch if you’ve pushed for more in the first place,” he says. “Big things change in short periods of time.”

If it seems naive to liken Stage Three tax cuts to far-ranging climate policy – which requires upending both the production and infrastructure of our energy consumption – you need only look at Germany. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Germany’s supply of fossil fuels was majorly disrupted, driving up wholesale energy prices and, in turn, threatening industry and the economic wellbeing of its citizens.

Rather than maintaining the status quo – and descending into crippling recession – Germany (Europe’s largest energy consumer) supercharged its renewable transition. In 2023, the country generated more than half of its electricity through renewables. While, admittedly, the country had a short-term increase in fossil fuels to aid with the sudden hit on their power supply, Germany aims to be 80 per cent renewables by 2030 and be mostly decarbonised by 2035.

How have they done it? Through decreasing energy consumption and increasing renewable production. The government tasked individuals, businesses and state entities with reducing usage of gas, resulting in an 18 per cent drop, while increasing generation of wind, solar and hydropower.

To shield the economic impact of the increase in wholesale energy, the government rolled out a series of relief packages, subsidising gas and electricity – without incentivising fossil fuel use.

Any debate about climate policy comes down to cost; investment in production and infrastructure, transitioning to all-electric homes and businesses, and the hit to investment incomes. And all of this is surmountable.

With returns from renewables beating fossil fuels three times over since 2010, divesting from fossil fuels isn’t just altruistic, it’s fiscally prudent. When it comes to financing large-scale electrification, SwitchedOn proposes the Electrify Everything Loan Scheme (EELS), which Pocock has included in his 2024/25 pre-budget submission. This HECS-style scheme, which covers the cost of homeowners implementing solar, batteries and electric appliances, results in households saving on energy bills while costing the government just six per cent of the funds loaned. If 80 per cent of Australian homes took the government up on its offer, the hit to the budget would be $10.4 billion – the same amount spent yearly on the fuel tax credit, which cuts the cost of diesel for mining trucks.

All-electric homes would see a significant drop in energy bills, even potential credits, which would be a welcome reprieve for struggling households who have experienced increases in energy prices of 40 per cent over the past two years.

In the longer term, the financial upside could also be realised in home insurance premiums, which have increased in part due to large losses from recent severe weather events.

Meanwhile, the sleeping giant in Australia’s energy policy picture is our laughably low taxes on the gas industry. Australia is the largest exporter of gas in the world, yet we barely skim the surface when it comes to taxing the companies taking our gas offshore and selling it for trillions. Since 1996, Norway has been taxing the profits of its oil and gas

LEFT: BEN QUILTY, RIGHT: KATHRYN FARMER

sector at 78 per cent, while we subsidise our gas industry. Proper taxation of the gas industry could fund electrification projects nation-wide, future-proofing our country for the economic weather to come.

In a sea of statistics, scientific nomenclature and euphemisms, climate lawyer Isabelle Reinecke puts it clearly to me. "Until we actually can say, loudly and strongly as a country, 'We need to drive down emissions by this much, by this state, and we are going to hold ourselves accountable to doing that', there's no way in the world that we can drive down emissions fast enough. The public needs to understand what we need, and then how we do it is simple. You shut down fossil fuels, you stop subsidising the fossil fuel industry. You stop the concept of offsets being a way to save the planet. You electrify everything."

## HOW CAN WE MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN?

VISIONARIES ASIDE, political action is driven by the fear of not being re-elected. Voters must make it known that they want the climate and energy policy that is going to save their lives in the long term and make life financially easier in the short term.

The major parties can feel this pressure two ways. They either hear noise directly from the public, or they lose their seat to an Independent, the Greens or another minor party.

This is what happened at the 2022 election – voters sent a clear message to the Coalition by voting six independents into Liberal Party blue-ribbon seats. In the ACT, David Pocock made history by being the first ever Independent to take one of the two tightly-held Senate seats. This sea of Teal in the middle of the major parties has seen more climate legislation tabled than ever before, and allowed forward-thinking climate policy and renewable energy to claim political buying power. With another election, many hope that power will increase.

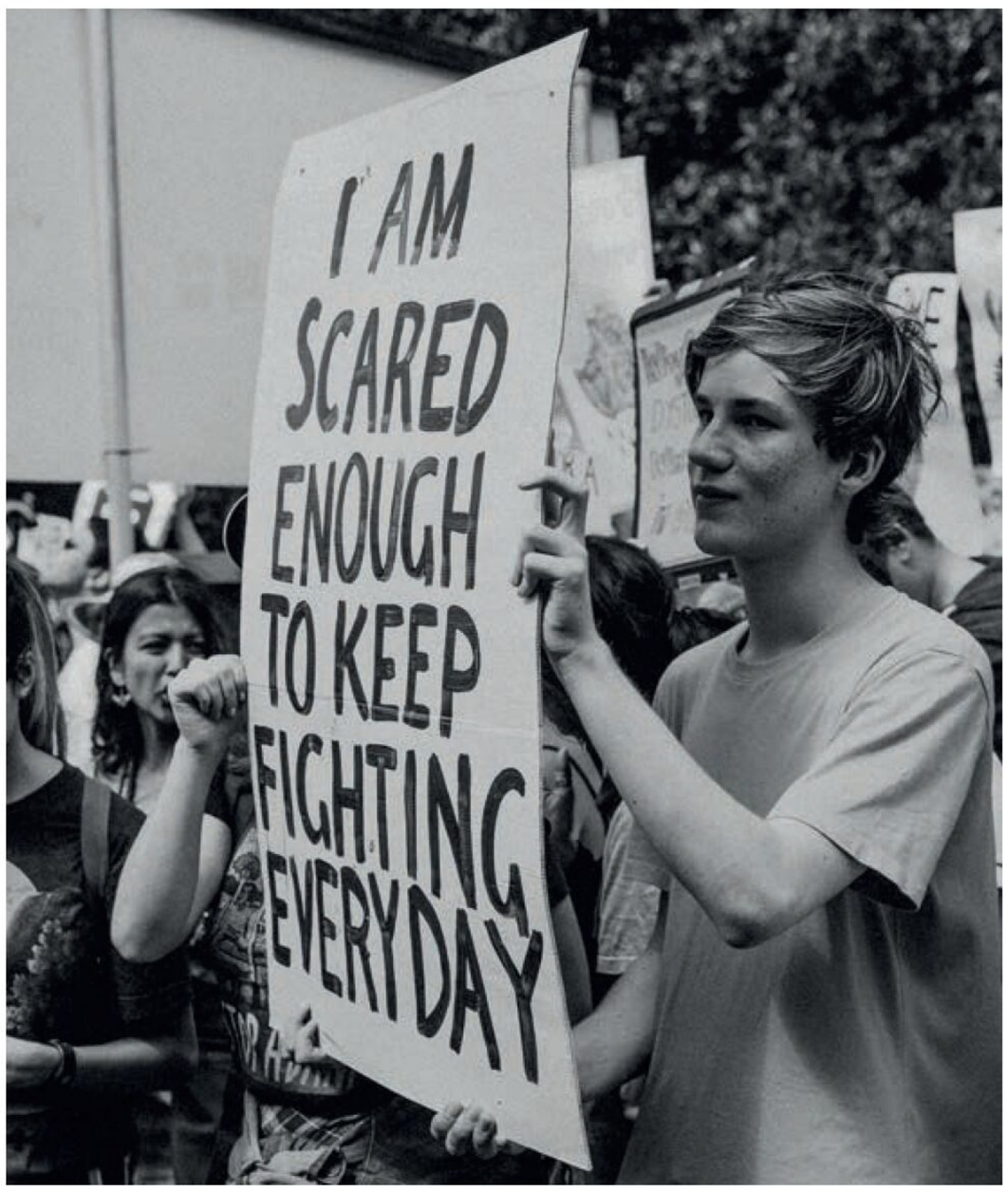
Earlier this year, Pocock introduced his *Duty of Care Bill*, which posits that any new fossil fuel projects should be assessed against the climate impact on future generations. Although it might not pass a Private Senator's Bill (the major parties selfishly only pass their own legislation), it has tabled the issue nationally once again.

Independent Senator Jacqui Lambie has pushed constantly for the creation of a fourth branch of Defence to respond to natural disasters, examining the real world impacts of climate change through a practical lens after countless disasters have impacted the country. In 2024, this concept may gain ground.

Looking ahead to the next election, what message will the public send the federal Labor government? Will it be a clarion call to climate action? Pocock hopes so.

"They may be better than Scott Morrison's government, but what about our kids?

▼ Scenes from the climate strikes on September 20th, 2019, when students from Australian schools skipped class to protest government inaction on climate change.



## "THE PUBLIC NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND WHAT WE NEED — YOU SHUT DOWN FOSSIL FUELS... YOU ELECTRIFY EVERYTHING."

ISABELLE REINECKE

What about our future? Can they actually deliver in line with what Australians want? And if they don't, I would hope that people vote for politicians who are going to stand up for their community. We've seen that time and time again in [Parliament], with the cross bench at every opportunity pushing for climate ambition."

As my now one-year-old daughter grasps for the keyboard as I try to finish writing this piece, I can't help but hope that everything I choose to do with my hands and mind in this life will edge closer to making something better for her, for us, for future generations who weren't in power or able to vote in the decisive decade.

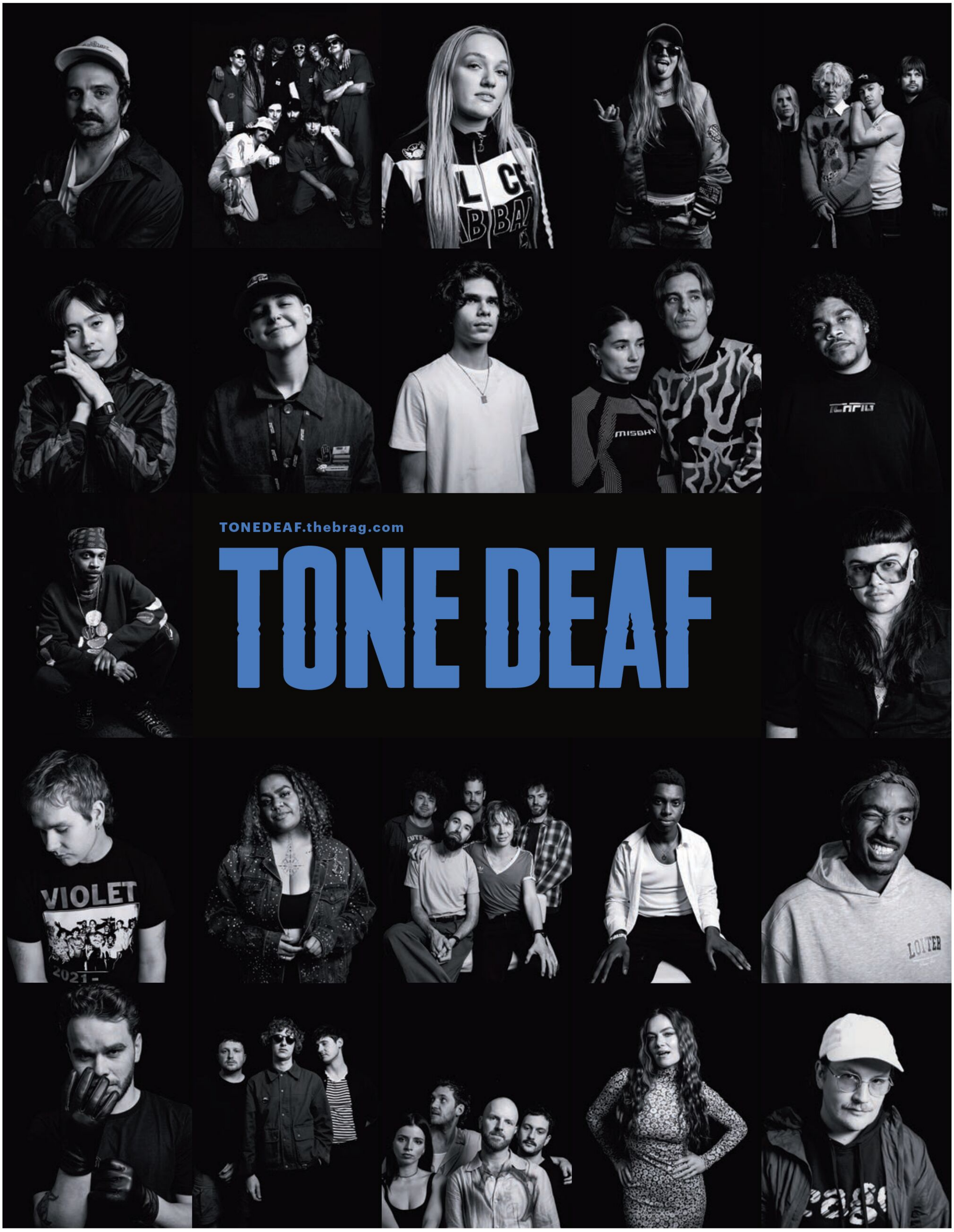
We are now at the point where we, as a species, need to think bigger than we have ever thought before. We must be incredibly decisive, irrevocably collaborative and, above all, we must believe that we have some kind of chance of changing our behaviour. We have to put old divides behind us if we are to survive together. We must radically change policies and the rate at which they are implemented. We need vision, ambition and action from our politicians, and it's up to us to remind them who they serve, what we want, and to hold them to account. ®

HOLLY RANKIN *is a writer, artist and strategist working in music and politics. Recently, she has worked with The Uluru Dialogues, Senator David Pocock, Climate 200 and ARIA. She is also an ARIA and APRA nominated songwriter and performer under the name* JACK RIVER.

▲ Kara Ahearn and daughter Allira in their home in Lismore. The family has moved 12 times since the flood, while repairing damage to the house with the help of a $20,000 government grant.

▲ Holly Rankin, aka Jack River, performs at Wanderer Festival in 2022.

TOP: BEN QUILTY, BOTTOM: RUBY BOLAND




PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Michelle Grace Hunder**

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# Reviews

Music

## DUA LIPA FINDS HER BLISS

***The pop megastar follows 'Future Nostalgia' with an LP that searches for a chiller groove***

By ANGIE MARTOCCIO

**Dua Lipa**
Radical Optimism
WARNER

IN THE VIDEO for Dua Lipa's *Barbie* hit, "Dance the Night", an enormous disco ball crashes onto the floor, the bottom half of its mirrors shattering into a million pieces. In an interview, her collaborator Mark Ronson theorised that it signified the end of Lipa's disco era, putting a bow on 2020's now-classic *Future Nostalgia*.

Released during the pandemic, that blockbuster LP turned Lipa into a household name and ushered a disco revival into the pop galaxy. The present was bleak, but *Future Nostalgia* promised one hell of a good time. Four years later, Lipa has finally released her highly-anticipated new album, *Radical Optimism*. The cover art features her out in

→

ILLUSTRATION BY
**Nigel Buchanan**

# MDOU MOCTAR'S GUITAR GLORY

## *A towering African musician mixes mind-blowing solos and an urgent political message* By JON DOLAN

Moctar (right) and crew

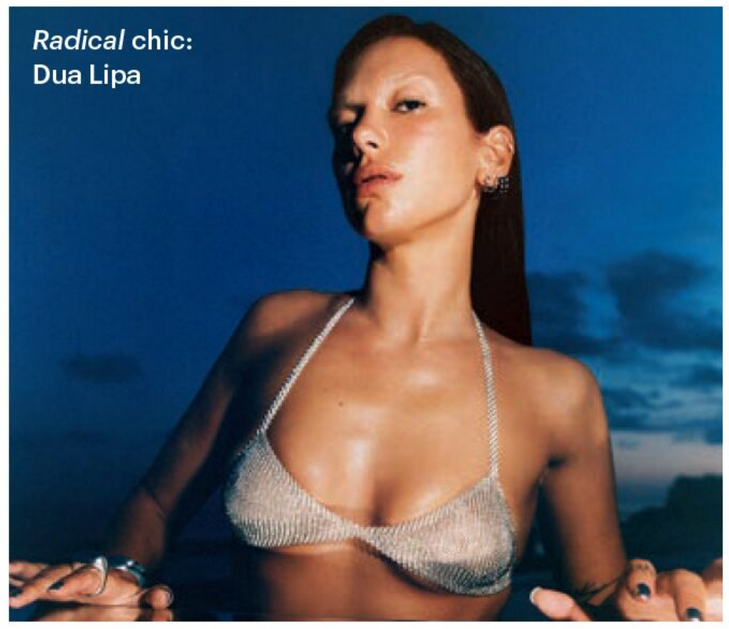
IN 2021, Mdou Moctar told ROLLING STONE, "My music is going to become more inspired by revolution". That promise was truth in advertising. For more than a decade, the Tuareg guitarist/singer-songwriter, who fronts the band that shares his name, has been staking out a space as a radical guitar innovator as well as a fearless spokesman for his strife-riven homeland of Niger. As he asks in Tuareg on the opening track on his band's excellent new LP, *Funeral for Justice*, "Dear African leaders, hear my burning question/Why does your ear only heed France and America?" His band's swarming attack and his searing solos turn that position-paper directness into a rousing call to arms.

**Mdou Moctar**
Funeral for Justice
MATADOR

Moctar has been making his own revolution since he was a kid, fashioning his first guitar in defiance of his strict parents' anti-music edict. On albums like 2019's *Ilana (The Creator)* and the 2021 breakthrough *Afrique Victime*, he and his band combined the earthy, ethereal guitar fire of Tuareg music with Moctar's Stratocaster pyrotechnics, which can plausibly bring to mind Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, and his early influence, Eddie Van Halen.

*Funeral for Justice* is the band's most forceful album yet, tailor-made to melt minds at massive festivals. "Imouhar" opens with rippling guitars and call-and-response, rendered with a lo-fi distance, before the sound becomes brighter and bigger, and rhythm guitarist Ahmoudou Madassane, drummer Souleymane Ibrahim, and bassist Mikey Coltun provide a charging, circular backing for Moctar's clarion shredding. "Tchinta" opens with Moctar's voice echoing like a herald over a chasm of prescient distortion, before the band takes off at a gallop. "Sousoume Tamacheq" starts with dense feedback worthy of Sonic Youth, then bursts into overdrive, with Moctar's guitar pushing out dense clusters of frenetic notes over the band's relentless precision.

*Funeral for Justice* is full of anti-colonial and anti-corruption declarations; "France's actions are frequently veiled in cruelty/We are better off without its turbulent relation", Moctar offers on "Oh France", which manages to feel sprawling yet dramatically urgent. "Imajighen" is a call for African solidarity that fittingly stays closer to home musically in its acoustic desert-blues beauty. "Modern Slaves" closes the set with a plea; after mostly blasting away for the entire album, the band locks into a steely yet sombre, mainly acoustic groove as it demands answers from the global powers that be: "Oh, world, why be so selective about human beings/My people are crying while you laugh", with Moctar's voice – and his axe – lighting us toward a freer tomorrow. ®


*Radical* chic: Dua Lipa

→ DUA LIPA

the ocean, appearing calm despite a looming great white shark. She says the album title refers to "the idea of going through chaos gracefully and feeling like you can weather any storm." While working on it, Lipa listened to Blur, Oasis, and other Britpop bands she grew up hearing on the radio. She was so inspired by psychedelia that she enlisted Kevin Parker of Tame Impala, who co-wrote, co-produced, and played on many of the tracks here (among other collaborators).

Turns out Ronson was right, or sort of right. "End of the Era" is a tripped-out dance-pop banger, a party in paradise where Lipa is so giddy in the club she busts out some *la-la-la-la-las*. "These Walls" has a gorgeous melody, and whimsical opening lines ("Maybe we should switch careers/'Cause, baby, you know no one beats our poker faces") that will rattle in your head for days – the mark of a true pop professor.

Lipa's voice sounds stronger than ever on *Radical Optimism*. Just listen to the sleek, ABBA-esque single "Training Season" and you can hear these raw, velvety pipes bring a song about mediocre dudes to life. That same voice shines on the closing track, "Happy for You", which sees Lipa ending a relationship on good terms, with nothing but respect for her ex's new relationship. The song aches with maturity and grace, and culminates in happy tears. Lipa has bid farewell to disco, but you can still see a flickering of glitter in these new songs.

Unfortunately, Lipa sometimes sounds so chill that the music loses energy and starts to blur into a blissed-out glaze. Several of the songs on the second half of the record come off like background music, especially compared with potent past highlights like "Physical". Ultimately, what you at times get is a watered-down version of *Future Nostalgia*, a record that feels adrift – even from Lipa herself. We didn't expect her to cover Blur's "Tender", or drop her own line of lava lamps, but we were hoping for something a little more distinct.

Lipa never needed to make "Future Nostalgia Part Two". No one expected her to be trapped in Studio 54 forever. Like any artist, she's bound to evolve and expand her catalogue, making records that capture where she's at in life at any given time. But as of right now, it's not entirely clear where she is on *Radical Optimism*. Perhaps that's the point.®

FROM LEFT: WH MOUSTAPHA; TYRONE LEBON

# Quick Hits

*Six new albums you need to know about now*

**JessB**
## Feels Like Home
WMA

The Kenyan-Aotearoa artist has left a clear message on her debut album: we are bearing witness to an artist standing in her power. Blurring the lines between sounds and ushering in a new wave of Afro-pop and dancehall, JessB flirts with mid-tempo drums and tender lyricism ("Hold Me Down"), buzzy sharp-tongued wit ("Power" ft. Sister Nancy and Sampa The Great), and club-ready desire ("Ring Ring" ft. Gold Fang). Produced by fellow Kiwi and hip-hop pundit WHO SHOT SCOTT, *Feels Like Home* sounds global, an exportable collection ready to take JessB far from home base. **POPPY REID**

★★★☆☆

**Raave Tapes**
## Raave Tapes
Independent

The dancefloor reigns for Raave Tapes, the Newcastle duo of Joab Eastley and Lindsay O'Connell. On their self-titled debut album, they trade their gritty dance-punk sound for pure hyperpop to get you moving. But behind the shimmering production and sparkling vocals (O'Connell especially shines on softer tracks like "Wake Up Next to You") they sing candidly about souring relationships. **SARAH DOWNS**

★★★½☆

**Mel Parsons**
## Sabotage
Cape Road

At eight tracks, the sixth album from Mel Parsons is a tight, fat-free collection of her trademark alt-country and indie folk, featuring some of her best songwriting to date (see: relationship-in-peril opener "Circling the City" and the winsome "Little Sadness"). All the references to bruises, calluses and scars imply Parsons has seen some tragedy, but *Sabotage* is pure triumph. **JAMES JENNINGS**

★★★★☆

**Pond**
## Stung!
Spinning Top

Always adventurous and unafraid to tackle different genres, it's surprising that it has taken until album 10 for WA's Pond to release a double album. There's plenty to savour, including glam-funk stomper "(I'm) Stung", Seventies-rock freak-out "Neon River" and epic centrepiece "Edge of the World Pt. 3". Sounding like an obscure psych-pop gem from another era, *Stung!* is Pond in fine, sprawling form. **JAMES JENNINGS**

★★★★☆

**Thomas Powers**
## A Tyrant Crying in Private
Sensible Anomie

Millennials will remember The Naked and Famous, who thrived when 'indietronica' was cool at the turn of the 2010s. Now, the band's Thomas Powers has proved his knack for impressive production hasn't diminished on his debut solo album. Here, his minimalist compositions are fused with melancholia and introspection, and one could imagine hearing these songs in a Joachim Trier or Spike Jonze film. **CONOR LOCHRIE**

★★★☆☆

**Hockey Dad**
## Rebuild Repeat
Farmer & The Owl / BMG

Australia's live music scene is struggling, but one of its most formidable bands keep delivering festival-ready rock anthems. *Rebuild Repeat* is unmistakably Hockey Dad, but Zach Stephenson and Billy Fleming also embrace exciting new sounds in these songs. From the coolness of the Hottest 100-nominated "Still Have Room" to the hopeful "Base Camp", an invigorating buoyancy uplifts this album at every turn. **CONOR LOCHRIE**

★★★½☆

SUPPLIED; MAYA LUANA; CHRIS FRAPE

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor
RATINGS ARE SUPERVISED BY THE EDITORS OF ROLLING STONE.

# LIME CORDIALE

## *Anticipation sky-high for Leimbach brothers' third record* BY POPPY REID

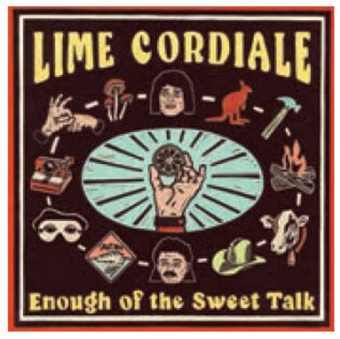
AS PURVEYORS of breezy indie-pop with subversive lyrical undertones, expectations were high for Lime Cordiale's third effort.

Thankfully, brothers Oli and Louis Leimbach have returned with yet another triumph. *Enough of the Sweet Talk*, with its swaggering groove and mournful rawness, is an exercise in lo-fi power-pop.

The record's tracklist takes you through the journey of a relationship. From the guileless early days, through to those moments of wide-eyed realisation and then ultimately: the heartache. Written over the course of a few years, the brothers bring together their individual stories and experiences – not all of them romantic encounters – to create a relatable journey of love and loss.

There's a sense of care and caretaking in each of the tracks, from the social anxiety that inspired "Colin" to the late night arguments that spurred "Cold Treatment". It's as if the brothers sat together in the emotion of each track, reliving or delving into the empathy needed to tell the other half's story.

Paired with bouncy guitar melodies, warbly synths and spiralling horn celebrations from the multi-instrumentalists, this record feels like liberation. Lime Cordiale have had their sound honed for some time; but an album that can make you cry-dance in your living room is the ultimate flex. ®




**LIME CORDIALE**
Enough of the Sweet Talk
CHUGG MUSIC
★★★★★

# PARK RD

After a year packed with prominent showcases for their music, including at SXSW Sydney, Auckland's PARK RD have built on last year's promise with a debut album packed with singalong choruses and headily youthful songwriting.

Their pop-meets-rock sound is firmly pitched towards fans of Spacey Jane (who, incidentally, once asked PARK RD to support them in Aotearoa) and The 1975 — particularly the latter. In Tom Chamberlain the band have a charismatic lead singer in the mould of Matt Healy.

The songs on *The Novel* are, almost to a fault at some junctures, pristinely polished for commercial viability, but increased experimentation and narrative risks can, for the PARK RD boys, wait until a second album. For now, *The Novel* achieves what any debut collection should: it gathers their most memorable singles together, while also providing just enough moments of sonic intrigue between those standout moments. **CONOR LOCHRIE**

**PARK RD**
The Novel
LOOP
★★★☆☆

**GEORGIA LINES**
The Rose of Jericho
AUGUST AVENUE
★★★★☆

# GEORGIA LINES

## *Magic is made on delicate debut album* BY POPPY REID

**GEORGIA LINES'** debut record sounds so raw and delicate that you immediately feel the heartache which had to be overcome to make it. With songs about the dichotomy of a life well lived ("Grand Illusion"), mourning what could have been ("Not By Your Side" ft. Teeks), and all the wished-for-words left unsaid ("The Letter"), it's any wonder she is one of the most exciting songwriters to come out of Aotearoa in recent memory. Make no mistake, the record leans into piano-driven R&B and indie-pop, but with so much imagery and truth in each song, it sits in a room of its own. *The Rose of Jericho* captures the internal struggle we all feel at some point — that's the magic of Georgia Lines. ®

SUPPLIED: OLIVER BEGG; FRANCES CARTER

# CROWDED HOUSE

REFUSING TO COAST on past glories, original Crowded House members Neil Finn and Nick Seymour welcomed an old friend (Mitchell Froom, producer of the band's first three albums) and fresh blood (Finn's sons Liam and Elroy) into the band in 2020, the five-piece gelling wonderfully on this loose, gently psychedelic LP that's still guided by Finn's immaculate pop instincts.

Opener "Magic Piano" channels a stoned Beatles vibe that would make Paul McCartney envious, and "Teenage Summer" proves Finn is still the Southern Hemisphere's undisputed king of jangle pop.

Both Elroy and Liam Finn make valuable contributions, the latter writing album highlight "The Howl" (a song that also features in a slightly different form on Liam's excellent new album *Hyperverse*).

It's an impressive new chapter for Crowded House that hints toward there still being plenty of interesting corners of the pop universe left for them to explore. **JAMES JENNINGS**

**CROWDED HOUSE**
Gravity Stairs
BMG
★★★★☆

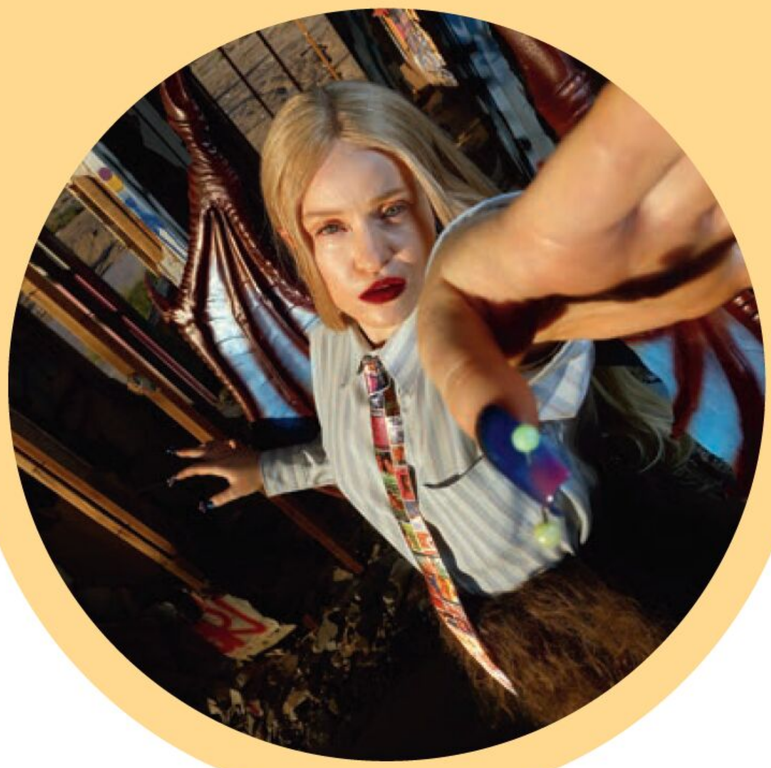
# KUČKA

You can tell a lot about a producer by their choice of collaborators, and KUČKA has had an almost peerless run. Rappers like A$AP Rocky and Vince Staples; rising stars flowerkid and Imanu; fellow electronic titans including Mount Kimbie and, of course, her frequent creative partner Flume.

*Can You Hear Me Dreaming?*, however, is all about Laura Jane Lowther (although Flume does feature on the euphoric and experimental "One More Night"). The English-born, WA producer's second album expands on her impressive 2021 debut album *Wrestling*. She effortlessly merges irresistible pop hooks with gleaming electronic production, her opaque songs vibrating with glitchy twists and turns.

This album should be a coronation for KUČKA as Australia's next truly great electronic export. In 2022, she supported Flume at Coachella; what a pleasing circular moment it would be if the roles were reversed at the iconic festival next year. **CONOR LOCHRIE**

**KUČKA**
Can You Hear Me Dreaming?
SOOTHSAYER
★★★★☆



# ALLDAY

After exploring indie-pop on last album *Drinking with My Smoking Friends*, Allday, aka Tom Gaynor, is back in full rap beast mode for a loose concept album about acting like a bit of a dirtbag, but actually having the maturity to admit it and be held accountable.

Concept or not, this features some of Gaynor's best music to date: "Toxic" taps the sped-up soul samples and gospel choirs of Kanye West at his best; "Miss You", which features Cub Sport and interpolates Ben Lee's "Cigarettes Will Kill You", seems destined to top the next triple j Hottest 100, and "Bon Voyage", a yodel-sampling tribute to a fallen friend, is genuinely affecting. With heartbreak, humour *("I make hot girls take the bin out to give them life experience,"* Gaynor raps on "Bratz") and hooks aplenty, this is Allday operating at the top of his game. **JAMES JENNINGS**

**ALLDAY**
The Necklace
DEW PROCESS
★★★★½

SUPPLIED; DILLON HOWL; BOB FOSTER

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Gosling and Blunt get ready to call "Action!"

# Movies

## CRASH, BANG, AND PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE

***'The Fall Guy' starts as a love letter to stunt performers. It ends up paying tribute to the power of movie stars*** By DAVID FEAR

**The Fall Guy**

STARRING Ryan Gosling, Emily Blunt, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Hannah Waddingham, Winston Duke, Stephanie Hsu

DIRECTED BY David Leitch

THEY TAKE THE punches, they crash the cars, they're the unknown stuntmen and stuntwomen who risk their lives to entertain you. In a world where VFX rules the roost, these fearless performers are the people you call when you need someone to plummet out of a helicopter onto a flaming speedboat.

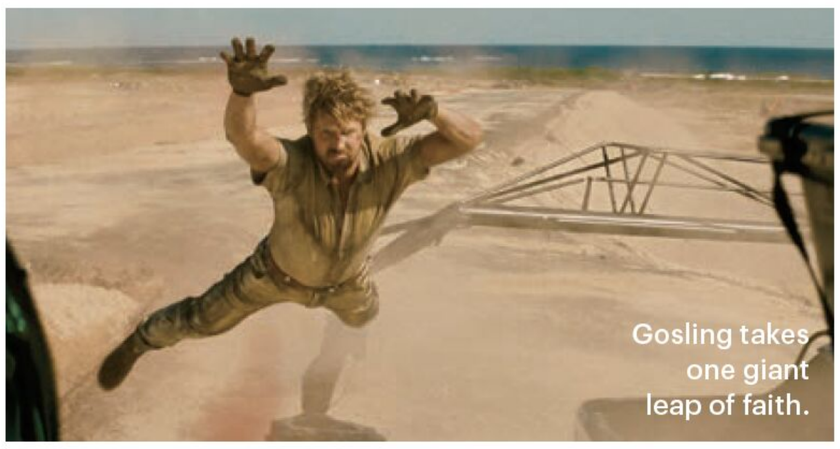
Still, I'm not sure anyone was begging for an adaptation of the Eighties TV series featuring Lee Majors as a stuntman who busted criminals in his off hours. Many people still want to watch unbelievably charming, photogenic actors do the kiss-kiss-bang-bang tango as their faces are projected 20 feet high, however – especially if one of them is the Ken Who Would Be King.

Welcome to *The Fall Guy*, a movie that borrows elements from that Reagan-era prime-time Cheez Whiz, then burns rubber while going its own way. Yes, it doubles as a way for former stuntman turned director David Leitch (Atomic Blonde) to pay tribute to his bruised, battered brethren. But it's really about the rush of watching Ryan Gosling and Emily Blunt making goo-goo eyes at each other in between the occasional explosions, shootouts, and industry in-jokes.

Gosling is Colt Seavers, longtime stunt double for the world's biggest action star/diva Tom Ryder (Aaron Taylor-Johnson). He's been spending a lot of time on his latest shoot nuzzling up to Jody Moreno (Blunt), the camera operator. What should be a simple 12-storey fall turns into an accident, however, and sends him to the hospital. Cut to 18 months later, and Seavers is parking cars. His life's in an existential tailspin.

Then Ryder's longtime agent (*Ted Lasso*'s Hannah Waddingham) says she needs Seavers to get to Sydney ASAP. Her star client has lost his new stunt double, putting his latest sci-fi action blockbuster in jeopardy. The catch is that Jody's the director. It's his chance to rekindle their romance. Call "Action", and Seavers is fearless. When it comes to matters of the heart – he's just Colt!

Once he's on set, Seavers gets a frosty reception from the woman he essentially ghosted. Jody is angry, but she's also quietly thrilled to see Colt again. It's a classic rom-com setup, in other words, that just happens to involve someone doing a life-threatening car roll. There's also a murder mystery, a chase involving a garbage truck, a crotch-biting dog, and Gosling (or rather, his stunt doubles) running, jumping, and driving like a maniac. Leitch does his usual choreographed fights and bullet ballets. The film's supporting players, which include Winston Duke as the movie's stunt coordinator and Stephanie Hsu as Ryder's assistant, get to crack wise and steal scenes.



Gosling takes one giant leap of faith.

But *The Fall Guy* is at its delirious best not when it's ginning up sound and fury and mayhem, but when it simply lets Gosling and Blunt trade screwball banter and give every scene they share a will-they-won't-they tension. No one needs to be told that Gosling has excellent comic chops at this point, especially after that epic "I'm Just Ken" at the Oscars. And we don't need to be sold on the fact that these two actors have extraordinary chemistry together either. Several hours after seeing *The Fall Guy*, you may forget the majority of the movie's rock-'em-sock-'em stunts. But you'll likely remember a long confessional exchange between Colt and Jody conducted with bullhorns. Or, in the film's standout scene, a meta-conversation via a split screen that sees Blunt making excellent use of a prop alien hand.

So much of the crash-boom-bang feels indistinguishable from a dozen other action films released in the past two years, or five years, or past few decades. And then Gosling and Blunt start flirting and fighting with each other, and you feel like you're floating an inch above your seat. *The Fall Guy* starts off as Leitch's love letter to those behind-the-scenes heroes who make the movies thrilling. It ends as a tribute to movie stars, reminding us that the greatest special effect remains a close-up of two people who happen to be famous exchanging kisses, retorts, or simply a look. That's entertainment! ®

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# Kathleen Hanna

## *The punk icon on her memoir, Lyme disease, and Kurt Cobain*

**When did you decide to write a memoir?**
I started five or six years ago. I was at this transitional point in my life – it was before Bikini Kill and Le Tigre started playing again – and I wasn't really sure what I was going to do next. I felt like I had to just write everything down that had happened, for myself, so I could move on to the next step. I needed to leave the Nineties behind.

***Kathleen Hanna's memoir,* Rebel Girl, *is out now via Ecco.***

**You're so vulnerable and open in the book, particularly about the times you were sexually assaulted. Are you nervous about all that being out there?**
Not really. It's not my problem. The people who did those things to me, they can have it now. I'm not going to hold their secrets for them anymore. I'm 55, and up until last year, I was taking responsibility for many of the sexual assaults I've experienced. It was my way to say I had agency. It wasn't about me feeling shitty about myself, it was more "Well, if I did this or that or this or that different, then this or that wouldn't have happened".

**In the book, you write about your struggle with Lyme disease, and how you discovered that you had it since you were a kid.**
I was a professional patient for many years, and I had a notebook that I would keep all of my lab tests in – like Tracy Flick from *Election*, but as a patient. I would go into every doctor's office with a written summary, because my memory was bad. So, if I had a good day, I would spend that day organising my stuff. And part of what I started discovering was that I had actually been having Lyme symptoms since I was a child. There's a certain kind that I have that's from the East Coast, specifically from Maryland, and that's where I grew up. And it made me feel a little better, because I was like, "Oh, well, no wonder it got so bad – it was never treated." But I did get the right treatment, and I'm doing really, really well.

**That's great.**
I can tour. It's bananas. Who thought that was going to happen?

**What advice do you wish you could give your younger self?**
Get a therapist. Prioritise your mental health. If you're not enjoying your life, then something's got to change. We're only here for a very short amount of time, and you are not put here to have a shitty, sucky life. If there's things that you enjoy, run towards those things. And have a lot of sex.

**You write in the book about your friendship with Kurt Cobain. How has it been for you to see Nirvana continue to be such a cultural force, even 30 years after the end of the band?**
You cannot walk three feet in any country, any city, without seeing a Nirvana shirt. That's pretty amazing for two guys from Aberdeen [Washington] to do that. I see 80-year-old women wearing Nirvana shirts; I see them everywhere, and it makes me smile. I feel proud of them.

**It must be very exciting to see art that meant something to you continue to be meaningful to generations of people.**
I can't really listen to them because I get really sad, and I just really wish that Kurt could have enjoyed it. And that's the hard part – just being like, wow, I wish that he would've seen us live past the stupid Nineties "you're a sellout" thing. I wish he could just still be here, and making stuff.

**What advice would you give to a girl who wanted to start a band now?**
Find a friend that you really enjoy spending time with and ask them if they want to make music with you. Then just start with whatever you have. If you have a piano, your band is you, your friend, and the piano. If you have a computer with GarageBand, you can clap your hands into GarageBand, and then just sing over the clapping. It doesn't have to be guitar, drums, bass, keyboard, or manufactured beats. You don't have to be a genius. Make what you feel like making. Your first 20 songs are going to suck, but that's part of the process. You have to make your first shitty songs so that you can make your first good song, that you're like, "Oh, this is it. This is my first good song".®

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